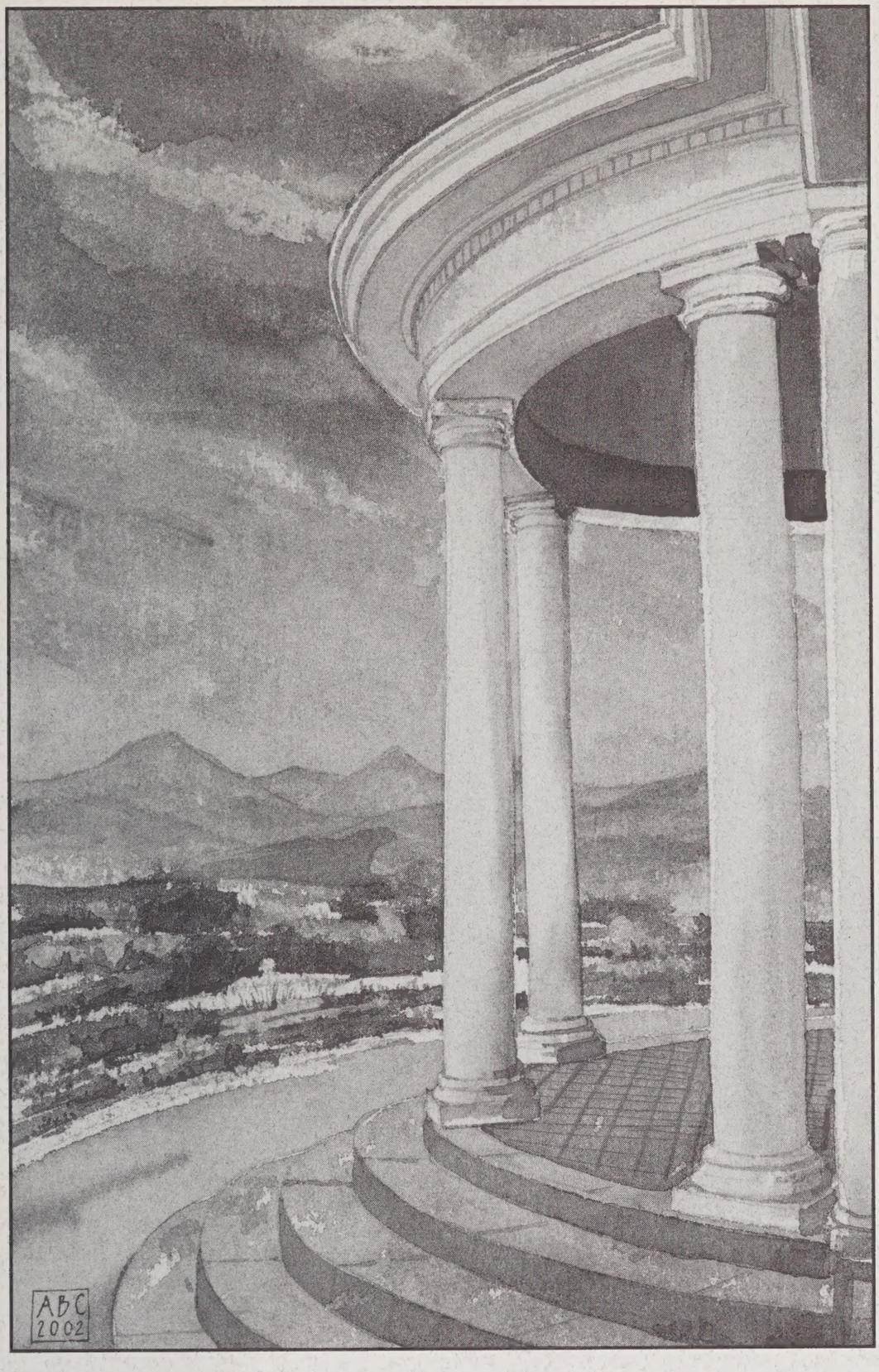

Victoria Press

2002

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Mary Hay Gwynn,
charter editorial board member of *Victoria Press*.

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree

...

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow

...

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

William Butler Yeats

Victoria Press

Eighth Issue

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College
Asheville, North Carolina

2002

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K. Ray Bailey, President,
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Table of Contents

Drawing by Joan Worth viii
Better Come Home by Kathryn Stripling Byer 1
Absence by Kathryn Stripling Byer 2
Drawing by Joan Worth 3
Halloween Again by Kathryn Stripling Byer 4
Drawing by Karen Chambers 5
Coming Home by Richard J. De Luca 6
Drawing by Joan Worth 7
The Sweet Spot by Will Hooper 8
Drawing by Joan Worth 15
First Light by Nancy Dillingham 16
Midwife by Nancy Dillingham 16
In the Dark by Nancy Dillingham 17
First Breath by Nancy Dillingham 17
In the Winter by Nancy Dillingham 18
Mourning by Nancy Dillingham 18
Diamondback: by Nancy Dillingham 19
Spell of Rain by Nancy Dillingham 19
Photo by John Bowers 20
Driving into the Night by Dara Llewellyn 20
Drawing by Joan Worth 21
Banks by Lee Sokol 22
Drawing by Shirley Lyon Garcia 24
Pat's World by Amy Knight 25
Main Street by Julia Nunnally Duncan 28
On the Rag by Bonnie Temple Cassara 30
Drawing by Bonnie Temple Cassara 31
The Adjunct's Cycle by Gigi Derballa 32
Drawing by Joan Worth 33
They Won't Take 14-Year-Olds by Sandi Goodridge 34
Photo by Rebecca Davis 34
Dragonfly by Carolyn Pidgeon 36
Ideas by Carolyn Pidgeon 36
Irresponsibility by Carolyn Pidgeon 36
To Helen by Carolyn Pidgeon 36

Drawing by Joan Worth 37
Skin Deep by Gerald A. Metz 38
Of Kites and Dreams by Margaret Darnell 44
Drawing by Joyce Dover 44
Killer Rolls by Charles DeVries 45
Drawing by Joan Worth 45
She by Thomas Gore 46
Illumination by Diana LaSpada 48
Acrylic painting by Diana LaSpada 48
Fruition by Diana LaSpada 49
Acrylic painting by Diana LaSpada 49
Nona and the Moon by Gabrielle M. Thompson 50
Drawing by Judy Borum 54
Georgia's Quilt by Jennifer Browning 55
The Buttons by Celia H. Miles 56
Drawing by Annie Cicale 57
A Past and Present Moment by Dara Llewellyn 58
St. Francis and the Playboy Bunny by Randee Goodstadt 60
May 14, 2001: Martin Luther King Boulevard by Randee Goodstadt .60
Photo by Shirley McLaughlin 61
Shell-Shocked by Chris Smart 62
Untitled by Joshua Bienko 63
Photo by Annie Clingenpeel 63
Welcome to Graceland by Laura Reis Mayer 64
Painting by Bonnie Temple Cassara 65
8 a.m. on the Tarmac by Kenet Adamson 66
Photo by Annie Clingenpeel 66
Show Time by Joanne S. Johnston 67
Photo by Joanne Johnston 67
Oh, Holy Night by Nelda Holder 68
Drawing by Joan Worth 69
Notes on Contributors 70
Photo by Shirley McLaughlin 72

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Cover watercolor of Fernihurst Building by Annie Cicale

Drawing by Joan Worth

Better Come Home

Kathryn Stripling Byer

or I'll lasso the trees
and hang out my red dress and silk
shimmy, little black undies.
Don't you know
the devil's a mighty wind
blowing the Tennessee Valley
brown, brown as the mud
on your boots walking
home to a woman like me
who can't wait without
causing more trouble than
she's ever asked for?
So I'll tie this rope tight
enough to hold fast.
Lord, how I love the smell
of wash strung from a clothesline
when night falls
with too much reckless
time on my hands.

Absence

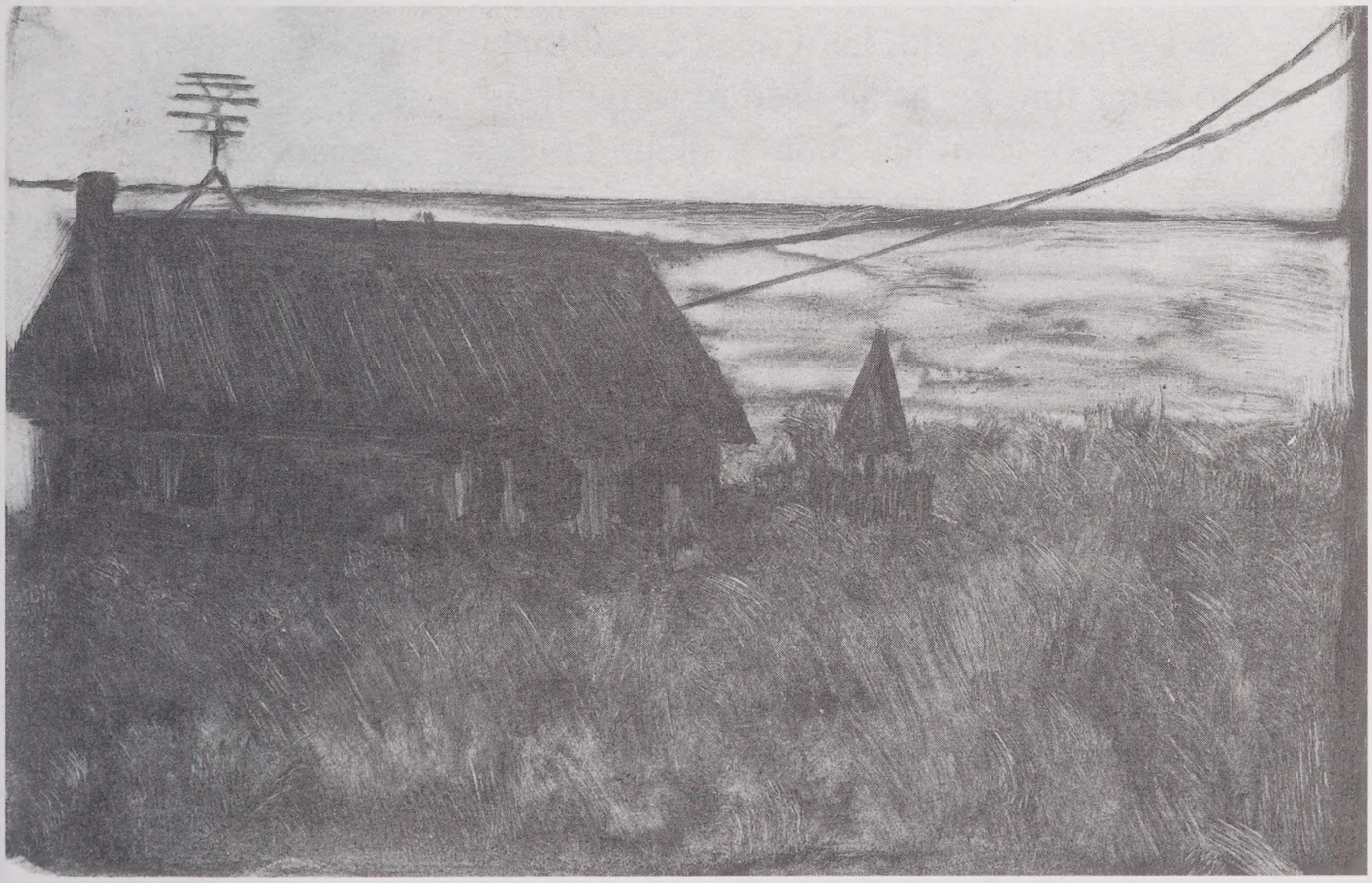
Kathryn Stripling Byer

for my nephew Mitch, on graduation day in Massachusetts

I've thought about this word a lot
lately, so much of what used to be present
now being, obviously, absent. My youth,
for example. We mid-lifers fret
over what's lost, but, frankly, I never much liked
myself young. I do not mourn the loss
of my 20-year-old blooming
face in the mirror. I do miss my sharp eye
for threading a needle, my keen recollection
of even the slightest minutiae from *Gone*
with the Wind. What I miss most
is having my daughter nearby, though her telephone
calls keep us close and our GTE bills
astronomical. More and more I can conceive
of what living without those I love
on this earth will be like. When my daughter,

your cousin, left home, I wrote,
blinded by tears, "Now her absence will run
through my days like a red thread." Which then
made me think about what your great-grandmother said
as I stood at her stove stirring sugar
and more sugar into the mayhaw juice, wanting
the jelly to make in a hurry. "Just keep stirring,"
she told me, over and over again
until, just as she'd promised, the juice spun a thread
from my spoon and we knew
it was ready to pour into glasses for keeping.

That red thread does not, I see
now, reveal absence but rather its
opposite: the things we have loved
remain with us, as rich and, yes,
sticky sometimes, as they ever were.
Absent, I'm with you as surely as I can imagine
an old woman keeps speaking
out of the ruins of her burned to the ground
Georgia kitchen. She wants us to keep
at it. Keep stirring. Spin the red juice
of our lives into skeins that don't loosen
or snap over distance. Or time. Sweet
as blessing spread over the breadth of her
absence. The length, as the crow flies, of mine.



Drawing by Joan Worth

Halloween Again

Kathryn Stripling Byer

and time slides like silk
against silk. When I rose
this morning, I heard Copper
woofing outside, sounding weak as if he'd lost
his voice. Had the pumpkin
I set on the cinder block last night frightened him?

Poor dog, time's almost done him
in. He used to glide through the woods like a silk
scarf tossed on the wind, almost pumpkin
colored in the sun. Now he's lost
in his dream-chases most days, a slow copper
ghost of his former self. If I urge him to rise

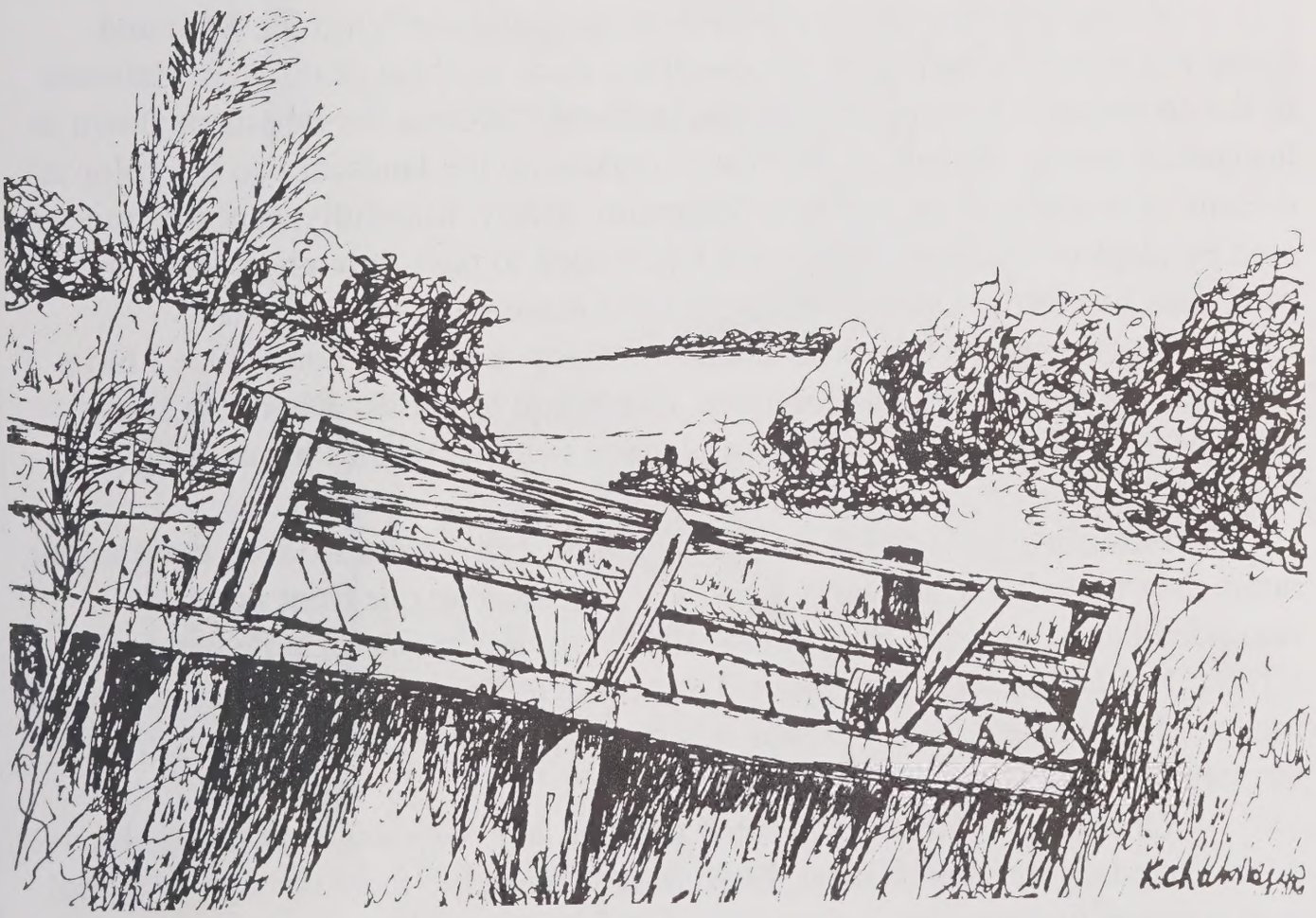
from the shag rug, he won't. If he rose
as I wish he could, he'd need a real magic pumpkin
to carry him far as he used to run, silky
spit strung from his chow's spotted tongue. Copper,
where are you, I'd yell, tripping over the hem
of my nightgown. Easy to get lost

in daydreams this time of year. Lost
letters. Lost memories. Lost copper
earrings a no-longer friend gave me. Split Silk,
I haven't forgotten how the name of that little church rose
from the roadside like a poem, a hymn
to the landscape I passed through. Pumpkins

lay piled beside fields and more pumpkins
than I've ever seen stacked in pyramids. Talk about lost
causes: trying to pay no attention to Copper
who's outside scratching the door to come in! Ahem,
I say, why should you come in, Mr. Smell-like-a Rose
despite everything? Why should you roll in the silky

green swaddle of your doggie dreams? The good folk of Split Silk
Baptist do not believe you have a soul. (Even the best pumpkin
butter can't make bad theology go down, I once scribbled into my lost
book of church supper recipes.) What if what rose
from the dead on the third day was Dog (not a Him)?
Like the one I just let in the front door, our own Copper

god of this place where the pumpkin still waits for a lost Cinderella
to come back home, drop her rose-colored glasses and hitch
up her silks, calling Copper, where are you? Don't leave me.



Drawing by Karen Chambers

Coming Home

Richard J. De Luca

Today, July 25, 2001, I came home. On this day in 1944, my dad was wounded while positioning a section of pontoon causeway at White Beach 2 on Tinian. He died on August 3. He would have turned twenty-six on August 30.

We arrived in North Carolina at 3:45 this afternoon. For me this is not simply a return home, but the beginning of a new life. Today I brought the last load of our personal belongings to Black Mountain, severing a vital connection to Ohio—the connection of things. Many were collected along the way, now having the weathered look of memories, too precious to be discarded. Books, letters, music, garden tools, items for the kitchen. Every card my wife has ever sent me. Others have been lifelong companions in moves to California, Hawaii, Indiana, and New Mexico. A fishing reel of my dad's, wartime photographs, his Purple Heart. A microscope and a set of slides used by my ex-father-in-law in medical school some seventy years ago. A few toys and books from my childhood.

It began to rain as we climbed the mountains of Virginia. Rain and dense fog created a feeling of sleepwalking from the heat of northern flatlands to the coolness of southern highlands. In North Carolina the rain came down in horizontal sheets, obscuring our vision, darkening the landscape to the color of dreams. It is still raining in Black Mountain, gently, forcefully, sunlight punctuated by claps of thunder. I wonder if I will need to pass through the rain and fog each time I return to Ohio, crossing and re-crossing the River Styx.

My things are here with me now. I know a place is home once I have arranged my books, hung the pictures, and begun to ponder where the first changes in the landscaping will take place. It is home when I have brought the dead back to life.

After my dad's death, Railway Express delivered a wooden crate to our home. My mom burst into tears when it was placed on our front porch. It reminded her of a coffin. She would always say it contained Dad's personal effects. Not *belongings*, but *effects*. I've wondered when the shift from belongings to effects takes place. Perhaps it is the passing from this life to another, through rain and fog.

Of course, I remain connected to Ohio. My two daughters live there, as do my stepdaughter and stepson. I will remain a teacher there through a tutorial with a young woman who is one of the finest students I have known. I will remain a friend and mentor to another young woman whose father has just died. I remain connected to a gentleman in his seventies, my closest friend and mentor.

I do not know what this new life will bring. I am confident it will be rich and exciting. It will give me the gift of new experiences, new passages through rain and fog. Eventually it will convert my belongings to effects.

Drawing by Joan Worth

The Sweet Spot

Will Hooper

Aunt Siri felt in her purse for a piece of gum. She hadn't had a stick since we left home a little more than an hour before. She smoked cigarettes thirteen years before but gave them up when her first husband, Alph, died of lung cancer. She finally found the gum and pulled a piece from the packet.

"Ya know, Katherine," she said to my mother, "I always used to tell Alph how I missed these mountains. We lived in Florida for fifteen years, but I never saw anything there as beautiful as North Carolina mountains."

We were driving towards Asheville to see the late October mountains. Aunt Siri hadn't been to North Carolina for a few years, and we figured a trip to the mountains would be a great way to spend a Sunday afternoon. So there we were, in my father's 1972 model Buick Electra, surrounded by the murky gray smoke from the tip of his cigarette and hurtling skyward on the twisting gray-black asphalt plane that had a faded yellow and white strip up its middle that was called "Highway 74."

Aunt Siri curled the stick of gum in her mouth and stuffed the wrapper in the car door ashtray. Then she took out her pocketbook mirror and dark-red lipstick and started to apply it to her already darkly painted lips. She noticed that she had enough lipstick on and stuck the mirror and lipstick back into her pocketbook. I thought how strange that red lipstick had always made her look to me, at least as long as I had known her, which could only have spanned back to her late forties. It must have looked better on her when she was young, or she would have never used it. But now the ruddy paste she smeared on her lips made her look like she was wearing an over-sized plastic lip mask like a kid would wear on Halloween. However, it did look right at home with her huge rimmed "Catwoman" glasses that often attached themselves to retired Floridian women.

Time and the Florida sun had not been gentle to Siri. Her face carried the folded creases and brown spots from many sunny afternoons spent working outside in her garden or just sitting in her backyard underneath an orange tree cutting holes in the tops of oranges and sucking out the juice, sometimes sitting right through those five-minute drizzling rains that periodically blew in from the coast.

Ironically, Siri had one up on time. Her face, once supple and firm, had taken on a leatherlike roughness. But the visage that evolved in its place had, in some mysterious way, retained the spirit of her youth, as though that spirit were encased more in an expression of beauty than in beauty itself.

"So what are you doing these days, Jimmy? Are you working now?" she asked me. She spoke in a deep and scratchy voice that still held a youthful energy that named her in my mind.

"No. I'm goin' to college."

"Oh, really? Well, that sounds interesting. Which college are you going to?" she asked, chewing her gum as she talked. She popped her gum like a teenager.

"Isothermal Community College. It's only a few miles from home."

My father, who was driving the car, said without turning around, "I've been tryin' to get the boy to get a job. He spent all last year at that college learnin' electrical wiring. I don't see why he needs to spend any more time in school when he could be out makin' money."

My mother, sitting on the passenger side of the front seat, looked at him, and with an exhausted but determined voice said, "I'swaney Henry, that's all you can talk about these days. I thought we'd already settled this. Let the boy go to college if he wants to. I'm sick and tired of hearing you gripe about it."

"Well, it's just that he could be makin' a lot of money, Katherine," my father said defensively.

"Well I'm sure that Siri doesn't want to hear all this. Let's just save it for later." And with that, the issue temporarily closed, to my great relief.

"Well I think it sounds like fun." Aunt Siri said, ending the statement with a deep and gentle laugh, popping her gum. "I never did get to go to college, and I think I mighta just liked it," punctuating her sincerity with one nod of her head.

We had been driving around sinuous mountain curves for about half an hour. Our ears had already popped, but those winding curves were not helping my stomach any.

Part of the time the roads were shaded by trees overhead and we could see small sections of a boulder-filled river flowing furiously black and frothy white at the bottom of the cliffs we passed. Then the view would clear and we could see west and look at the mountains we were approaching. The trees had already attained their most vivid and colorful appearance and it looked like God had laid a colorful patchwork quilt over them to keep them warm for the winter. Quilts like Aunt Siri and Grandma Jessie used to make when they were kids. I still had one that Grandma Jessie herself made when she was ten years old. My mother gave it to me when Grandma died eight years before.

"Oh, these mountains are so beautiful. You know Katherine, I used to tell Alph there was just nothing in Florida to compare to these mountains."

"Yes," my mother said, in slow and kind agreement.

By this time I had endured enough of my father's cigarette smoke and decided to quietly crack my window open. He didn't like the window open with the air conditioning on though, so I did it quietly.

Siri interrupted my renewed appreciation of clean air with a question. "So have you seen any young girls lately, Jimmy?"

"Nope," I said. "I'm hopin' I'll meet some in college next year." Then I knew what was coming next. Aunt Siri always did it.

"Well that's a shame. You're such a pretty boy." She reached over and started rubbing my hair back and forth with her hand. "Ain't he a pretty boy, Katherine? Looks just like you." She kept rubbing my head.

"Well, he must be if he looks like me," my mother said, with her characteristic chuckle, a sort of high-pitched "ha ha," not a knee slapping "ha ha," but a genteel, feminine "ha ha," that floated right to the top of the ceiling.

Siri kept rubbing my head.

"Ah, the boy's just a little backward," my father said. "I was that way too when I was young. Though I was gettin' over it by the time I was his age."

I took that remark as a partial reprieve in the conversation, as I usually did when he made similar remarks in my defense.

Siri finally stopped fumbling with my hair. I rubbed my fingers through it to straighten it out and thanked God that she didn't have the habit of pinching my cheek. I'd have blue marks all over my face by the time she let go of it.

"So how's Birdie?" my father asked. Birdie was Siri's second husband.

"Oh, he's just *fine*." said Siri, drawing the word "fine" out long and low.

Birdie was not well liked by the family. Not just because Siri's first husband, Alph, was such a great guy, which he was, and not just because Birdie was a witless, obnoxious jerk, which he was, but it was obvious to everyone but Aunt Siri that Birdie had only married her to get the money she and Alph had saved from owning a restaurant many years before.

I could see my mother wincing slightly at the thought of Birdie's existence. She recovered and asked in a suspicious tone, "Why couldn't he come with you?"

"I don't remember," said Siri, "probably had some business to attend to."

"Yeah, I'll bet," my mother said under her breath, as though she knew what "business" Birdie would be up to.

My mother told me the last time Birdie and Siri had visited that Birdie had given my sister a pinch on the butt and that she told him if he did it

again she'd tell Henry and Henry would beat the living shit out of him (which was the first time I knew of my mother using the word "shit" with the "i" in it; she usually just said, "sht," which, I figured, she didn't think was too unlady-like), but that she wouldn't tell Henry this time because Aunt Siri would find out.

Siri looked out the window awhile. Then she turned to me. "So what are you doing now, Jimmy? Have you gotta job?"

"No," I said. "I'm goin' to college this year."

"Oh, that sounds exciting! Where are you going?" she asked.

"Isothermal Community College. It's just a few miles away. I took electrical installation there last year, but I'm gettin' interested in some other things."

My father didn't say anything this time around. He just kept on driving. And he lit up another cigarette. He had not discovered my window was down yet, for I had pulled it down only a little so the whistle of air rushing out wasn't too loud.

"Well, I think that's something, Jimmy." Siri said. "You know, if I could do it all over again, I'd go to college. There's so many things to know." Then she turned to the window to stare at the ancient, weatherworn hills.

And I stared at her face, silhouetted by those hills. I remembered when I was six years old and my family went to Florida to spend a warm Christmas with Alph and Siri. My father sped down the two-lane road in our Ford Fairlane through darkness and light for ten hours to get to Orlando. My sister and I scrounged up against one another in the back seat, competing for sleeping space. My mother kept my father up with coffee and sandwiches, while she dozed between feedings. We came into town early in the morning and stopped by Alph and Siri's restaurant, for it was already open at six o'clock in the morning, serving truckers and early morning motorists on their way to work.

It was not a fancy restaurant but a small burger and fry stop that had the drive-in window on the side and the tall, blue-cushioned, rotating seats at the bar and the soda fountain and grill sitting visible right behind the counter, and the fluorescent lights in the early morning that gave it a strange mixed feeling of coziness and urgency. We all stepped up to the bar and everybody but me ordered bacon and eggs, for I was a hot dog man myself.

"We're just fixin' breakfast now, but I knew you'd be here Jimmy," Siri said, reaching beneath the counter, "so I got you a couple of dogs and fries and a chocolate milkshake right here." Siri knew my favorite combination. Then she took a couple of those tacky little white hats she and her cooks wore and slapped them on me and my sister's heads, and we all ate like hell.

I remembered other times there, in the summer, the evening sun shining low-angle beams of smoky yellow light into the screened-in porch. Alph's fat and friendly mass sitting and smoking Camels and my father smoking his Winstons and we listened to the radio to hear the reports of the daily war casualties. Then at night, watching *I Spy* on TV with the windows open and a cool breeze from the fan in the door filtering through the house which smelled like Siri's perfume mixed with sulphur water.

"Ya know, Katherine, I sure do love these mountains. I used to tell Alph how I missed them and I would come back to them someday."

"Yeah, they sure are pretty," my mother said, slowly and kindly.

I continued to watch Siri's face and the mountains beyond as they moved by. As I watched, the thought occurred to me that Siri, or some quality she had, was as permanent as the mountains we were driving past. But I couldn't quite figure out what that quality was. It was very spiritual in nature, and very lonely. It was the same feeling I got when I stared west after sunset on autumn evenings, when the air was sharp and dry, and Venus was a brilliantly glowing pearl set above the horizon.

There are three colors in the sky on those evenings: red, blue, and purple where the red and blue meet in the west above the horizon. I liked to stare at the purple and try to figure out where red became purple and purple became blue and why each color made me feel so different. And the feeling I would get while staring at the purple was that I was close to God without any effort at all. Like the sweet spot on a baseball bat, where, if the batter strikes the ball at that point on the bat, the ball will go the farthest distance without jarring the batter's hands.

Aunt Siri and the purple sky were like that to me. Looking at those two images made me feel close to the deepest reality of the world, without exerting any thought whatsoever.

In a terrible sense, Siri had truly become permanent. Through an unfortunate rolling of the genetic dice, she had acquired a disease in her old age that affected her short-term memory, leaving her unable to turn her present into a part of her past. The world of events along her horizon would pass by her, each event affecting her momentarily and then dying away, like a cool breeze on a hot day. All she could do was relive old memories, like watching old movie reruns in the absence of anything better.

We wondered about it sometimes. And I knew my mother worried about it. I saw her once sitting in the swing on our back porch on a summer afternoon with her Bible in her lap, and someone earlier that day had mentioned Aunt Siri and her sisters, Nell and Virginia, and their affliction. She sat there quietly and stared glaze-eyed out into the yard for a long time and watched

our dog, a collie named Booger, lounging on the grass under a tree as he sleepily awaited that heaven-bursting blast of rain and wind that every living being looked forward to on a burning summer afternoon.

We stopped at one of the little tourist traps along the road by a pretty little mountain called Chimney Rock to eat lunch. Siri stood for a moment near an old wooden park bench while she watched the river, which was flowing rapidly, cutting and spilling between large boulders. Then she moved near the edge. The water bubbled white in little dips and waves around the edges of the boulders and she watched the bubbles and stared at the trees up the small mountain across the river. My father walked up the gravel pathway leading to a little wooden shack that stood alongside the entrance to the park to pay for four hours of rental space. I was helping my mother set up a picnic dinner on the park bench.

We covered the bench top with a plain white tablecloth, and my mother proceeded to set food on it. There were tomatoes, mayonnaise, bread, potato chips, bottled cokes in a cooler, and some barbecued pork sandwiches we bought at a barbecue barn down the road.

After helping my mother just enough so I could claim I *had* helped, I walked over to join Aunt Siri.

"I tried to fish here a few times," I said.

"Did ya catch anything?" she asked.

"Na."

"I haven't been fishin' in years." Siri's head shook rhythmically, slowly, back and forth as she talked, keeping pace with her voice. "Me and Alph use to fish a lot a long time ago."

We were silent for a while.

"I think Daddy brought the fishin' rods and some lures if you wanna give it a try."

A smile cracked the lipstick on Siri's face. "Are ya'll gonna fish?! Oh, I haven't fished in years; not since me'n Alph fished together. Have you ever fished here before?"

"Yeah. Didn't catch anything though."

My father appeared at the campsite just as my mother finished setting the food on the table. He always timed that sort of thing well.

"Hey, Daddy, did you bring the fishin' rods?"

"Yeah I did; let me get 'um out." He opened the trunk of the car and got out the fishing gear.

"Ya'll ain't gonna fish before you eat are ya?" my mother asked.

"No, I'm just gettin' out the gear, Katherine," my father said, with impatient appeasement in his voice.

Siri walked toward the table. "Oh, I used to love to fish. In the summertime when we were kids, Daddy would take us all down to Broad River every Sunday afternoon after church. Did Jessie ever tell you about that, Katherine?"

"I believe she mentioned it a time'r two," my mother said as she sat down on the park bench.

"Oh, ya know back then me 'n Jessie 'n Nell 'n Ginny were all tomboys and we kept up with all the boys at school, especially at fishin'."

My mother smiled.

My father lit up a cigarette.

"I've fished in the Broad River *many a time*," my father said as he carefully leaned the rods against the car with his right hand and held the cigarette between the index and middle fingers of his left hand. "There's a lotta worms for bait along the bank." He flicked his cigarette, sending a chunk of ash to the ground. My father handled cigarettes beautifully. He flicked and puffed and held a cigarette so naturally and smoothly it made me want to take it up from time to time. Once, he let me try. It tasted terrible. The smoke lingered heavily in my throat for half an hour.

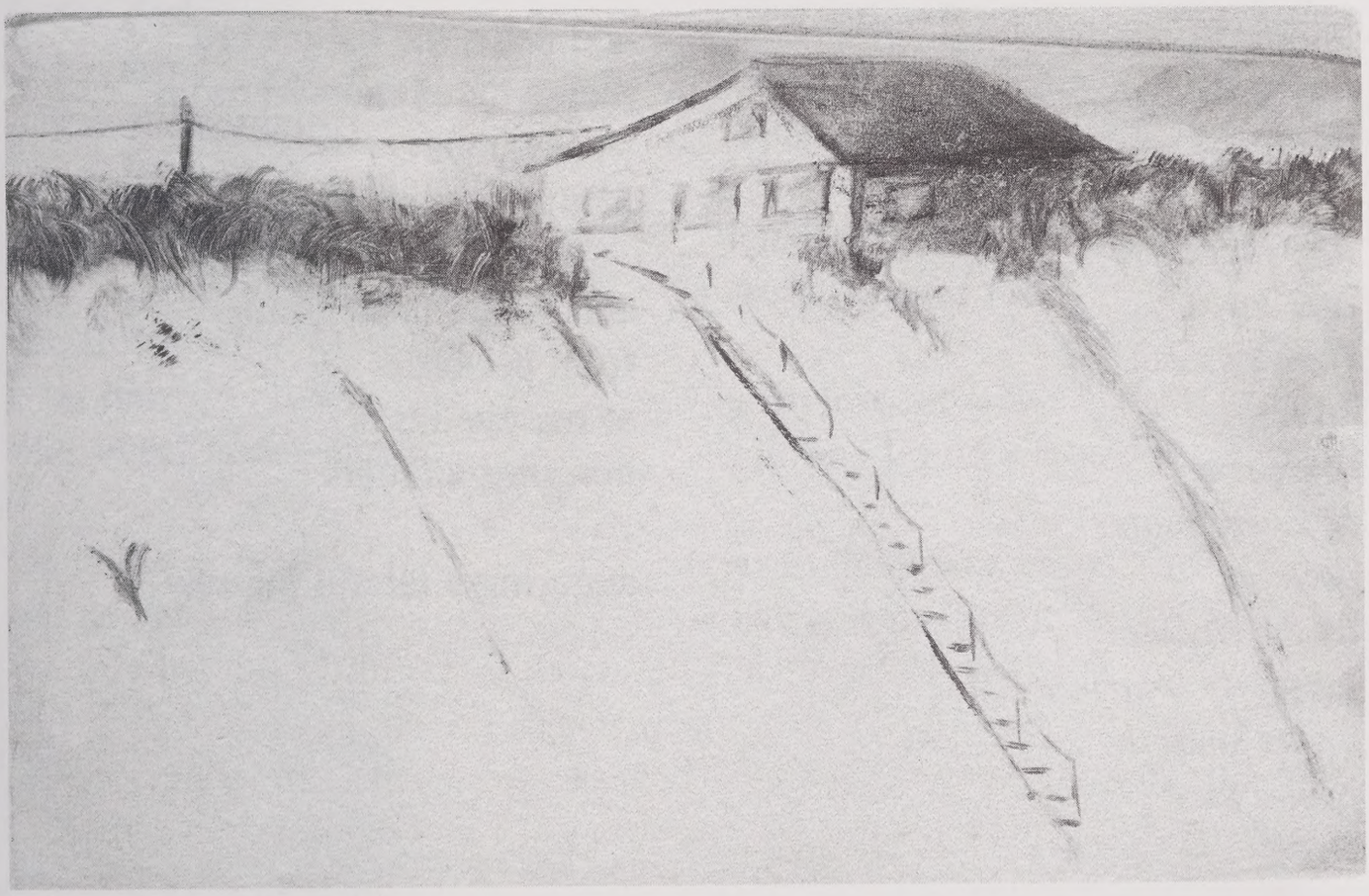
"Ya'll ready to eat?!" my mother exclaimed.

We gathered around the table and ate like hell.

* * *

We sat on a rock. Our fishing poles were deadly sticks of golden fire dangling before us in the cool autumn light. The river roared gently around us. Frothy white and gray waves of water curled gracefully around the sides of the boulders we sat on and dove into a trough in front of us. The river's voice was powerful, deep, soothing. The rocks remained calm within the turbulence. A sky frozen in cloudless blue sat between tall pines that shaped the mountains, and the river flowed inexorably toward the bottom of the sky. That blue washed through my mind like the water around the rocks.

Siri and I sat together, while my father sat fishing on a rock downstream, and my mother read a *Good Housekeeping* magazine in a lounge chair on the bank. I didn't know it then, but that trip to the mountains would be the last time I would spend with Aunt Siri. She would live another six years, but most of that time she would be in a nursing home, and I would be away at college. So when I think of her, that same image always comes to mind: sitting next to me and holding her fishing rod as steadily as possible, pasty red lips, those big old glasses, a slight palsy headshake, and one of the most infectious smiles I have ever known.



Drawing by Joan Worth

Poems by Nancy Dillingham

Excerpts from a book in progress: *First Light*

First Light

Soft as smoke rising
she moves
transparent
in white nightgown
in first light
barefoot
along the trace
to the springhouse

lifts the latch
and takes
from its cool
haven
one print
of sweet butter
delicate
as the flower
perfectly imprinted
on its smooth
round face

Midwife

The first time
she lifts life
from the writhing chasm
of a dark, bloody womb

and hears the baby's cry
pierce the plundered room
she swoons
like a lover swoons

and the sweat dripping
from her brow
to her eyelids
becomes amulets

auguring a fateful journey

Poems by Nancy Dillingham

Excerpts from a book in progress: *First Light*

In the Dark

"Like a fire in a dry thicket
Rising within women's eyes
Is the love men must return."
Louise Bogan

In the dark
in his arms
where the sunburn
and freckles
don't show

she flows
over him
like sweet honeysuckle

He tastes
her nectar

First Breath

". . . the yellow joy after the song of the sun."
Muriel Rukeyser

At the first inkling
of spring
when she opens up

snow dripping
from the tin roof

a divinity of white
glinting liquid silver sun

even the house gasps
to catch its breath . . .

Poems by Nancy Dillingham

Excerpts from a book in progress: *First Light*

In the Winter

". . . salvation
is an enterprise, grace the bottom line."
Robert Wrigley

Snowbound
under the moonlight
the winter night
wears a blue shroud

In the house
bodies heave
under cold sheets . . .

At dawn she rises
and at the hearth
stirs banked fire
unearths glowing coals

breathes
blows on them
their fireplay
precious as jewels

an urgency
of heat and light

Mourning

3 a.m.
and she can't sleep . . .

The moon drifts
over the mountain

Only a quarter's worth
it sits on its side

lights her valley
with silken silver

glows to gold
her muslin gown

Her coverlet
comes alive

each quilted square
a field of its own

telling
another story . . .

The earth
trundles toward morning

Poems by Nancy Dillingham

Excerpts from a book in progress: *First Light*

Diamondback:

a quarrel
of smoke

a coil
of rope

her hoe's
nosy poke

a rattle's
dry warning

a blurred
strike

a shivered
spine

a quicksilvered
slice

blood-
letting

writhing
till sunset

Spell of Rain

From her front porch
she sees
it coming . . .

Like a great
transparent snake
undulating

the rain carves
its wet white sign
across the mountain

walks a chalkline
through the valley
gathering force

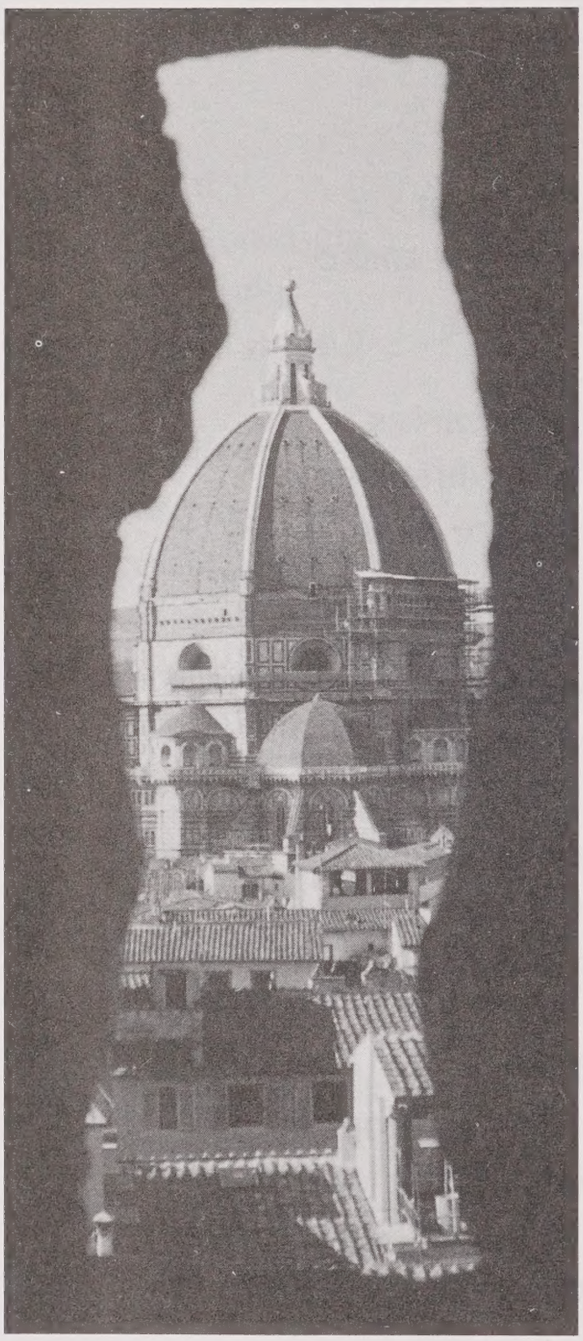
Then in a rumble
of thunder
and a flash of light

it drives
its first big drops home
like spikes

into her garden's flesh

Driving into the Night

Dara Llewellyn



I love
driving at night,
the road disappearing—
into darkness,
everything unknown.

The night
feels intimate.
Ensconced in the car,
I move through darkness,
alone, sheltered.

What lies ahead?

Rock slides in the road
just around a curve?
The road given way
over the river's edge?
Even a psychopath
thumbing a ride, smiling
in the light of an exit sign?

Lights glimmer ahead.
I steer over bumps,
around curves,
moving through the dark curtain,
a voice on the radio
telling me what a woman needs.

Where does the road lead?

Photo by John Bowers

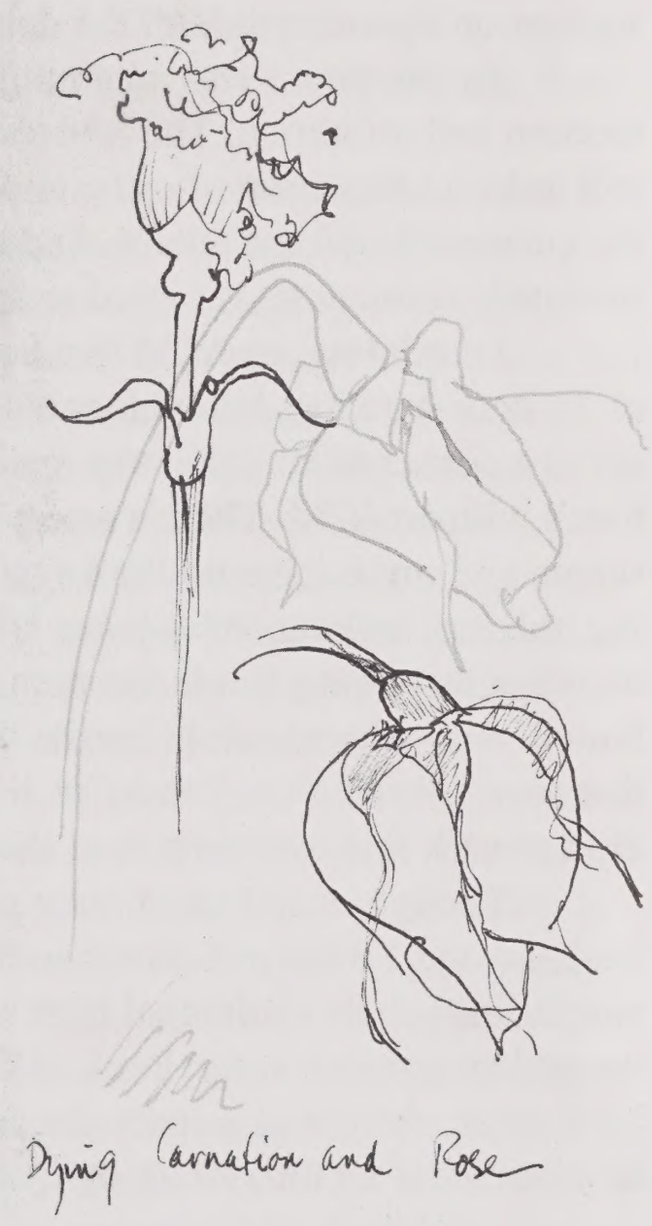
A friend's home—
just off the road,
a haven of comfort.
Or up a magical ramp—
another road, ending
wherever I want.

All possible paths
contained in the dark,
branches of riches,
opening into space.

I need only drive,
willing the night
to share—
its choices,
its enigmas.

I am free to drive.

The night beckons me on.



Drawing by Joan Worth

Banks

Lee Sokol

I love banks. This love started when I was four years old and went with my old maid aunt to withdraw money from her bank on Flagler Street in downtown Miami. I'm sure the hushed lobby was the most beautiful place I'd ever been, with its marble columns and vaulted ceilings. I stood silently by as my aunt dealt with the lovely, polite woman on the other side of the decorative brass grillwork

By the time I was an adult, bank architecture had become more modern and utilitarian. The lobbies no longer felt like cathedrals. But I still enjoyed the sense of order and decorum in the transactions between the customers and the tellers. And then Automatic Teller Machines were invented, eliminating the need to speak to a teller.

I can't love an ATM like I do a bank. I appreciate the convenience of 24-hour banking, but who could love that drab little monolith sitting off in a corner of an ugly strip mall parking lot? And there's no personal touch with an ATM. There's a sort of dialog between the words on the screen and my fingers on the keypad, but it isn't personal. No teller smiling, talking, making small jokes with me. Though I sometimes feel there's a tiny being inside the monolith who chuckles if I push a wrong button. And who certainly laughs disdainfully as I read the slip of paper that says "Insufficient Funds." A live teller would soften that blow with a kind remark that everyone does that sometime.

Though once I had a very personal relationship with an ATM. My husband and I lived in Colombia, South America, for two years while I taught English in a bilingual high school. Shortly after moving there, we opened an account at the Bank of Colombia. On the inside cover of the bank book, there was a space for an invisible signature which could only be seen under an ultraviolet light. A few months after we opened our account, the Bank of Colombia instituted Automatic Teller Machines. On my summer off, my husband and I traveled around Colombia by bus for several weeks. We took our ATM card, but not my bank book. I left the bank book safely in our apartment in case we lost the ATM card while traveling. (Or were pickpocketed—an expected occurrence in Bogota, but one which we didn't suffer.) After a couple of weeks on the road we ran low on cash, so we went to an ATM. The ATM was out of service because transit workers were on strike that week and had not delivered the stacks of crisp bills necessary in an ATM. The ATM was just outside

the bank itself, so we went inside to get cash. The teller could not give me any cash because I didn't have my bank book with the invisible signature. I explained that I had left the book safely in my apartment while traveling since I had an ATM card. Didn't the ATM card show that I had an account with the Bank of Colombia? But the ATM card would only work in the machine, she said. We looked at each other for a few minutes, both trying to think of a solution. Then she said for me to go back outside to the ATM machine and she would send a woman to hand feed bills through the machine. So I put in my card, punched the numbers, and a woman on the other side of the machine fed the bills through to me one by one, both of us chatting the whole time. There I was, having my first conversation with an ATM.

The most personal service I ever received in a bank was while I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand. This was before ATMs, so I had to go inside the bank and get cash from tellers, which sometimes meant standing in long lines. A lovely young Thai woman who was a junior officer in the bank noticed me (the tall white woman in line with all the Thais) and offered to give me personal service. She said she would keep my bank book locked in her desk drawer and I could always come straight to her instead of standing in line. I felt a bit guilty about getting preferred service just because I was a *farang*, but I knew that it would be rude to turn down her nice offer. So she became my personal contact in the bank. We enjoyed talking with each other and the arrangement worked fine. Until the Friday I went to withdraw quite a bit of money for a month-long trip to do a project at the other end of Thailand. She wasn't there that day; she was on vacation. My bank book was locked safely in her drawer, but no one could open the drawer. How was I to get money for my trip? I went to ask another bank officer for help. He suggested we get a locksmith. The two of us walked down the street to a locksmith's shop, explained the problem, and returned to the bank with the locksmith. The locksmith opened the drawer, gave the bank officer my bank book, and I got my money.

I've never had bad service at a bank in the United States, but somehow I can't imagine a bank officer here volunteering to get a locksmith to break into another officer's desk. Or a human being on the other side of the ATM, feeding the bills through by hand. I'm not sure we're ready here for such personal and creative problem solving.

Drawing by Shirley Lyon Garcia

Pat's World

Amy Knight

My friend Ally and I had an interesting conversation about what our children would be like. We decided that her child would be really laid back, say things like "dude," and possibly be a little slow mentally due to Ally's own mind-expanding extracurricular "activities." While laughing, she said that my child would be named Pat, like the character Pat on *Saturday Night Liv*e whose gender is ambiguous. The other characters in Pat's skits ask rude questions and invade Pat's personal space in attempts to glean information about what gender Pat is. Ally apparently thinks that I would try to have a gender-free child. Our conversation ended with a guffaw as we plotted how our hypothetical children would interact with each other. Even though I don't really want to have or raise children, I've found myself thinking about Pat and daydreaming about the kind of environment that I'd like Pat to grow up in. I imagine a society in which children explore and understand social construction, how people experience difference and how this difference is celebrated.

In this place, pale pink and pale blue are nothing more than the colors of cotton candy and the kids think that painting each other's toenails with purple glitter polish is just as fun as the big, red Tonka truck. My child Pat would not be seen as the threat or freak that the *Saturday Night Live* character is. Even more ideally, all the children would be gender-free. None of them would be trying to be "tough guys" and none would be told to "straighten up and act like little ladies." But, if Pat chose to wear Pat's hair in braids it would be okay. Pat's friends would say, "cute hair," and mean nothing more than, "cute hair." Pat would be unmarked. None of the adults would worry about the children being trapped by patriarchal ideals. Patriarchy wouldn't exist. Pat would not be sized up because of clothes, make-up (or lack of it) and Pat could accessorize without being thought of as pleasing someone else. If by some chance of nature Pat were born intersexed, there would be a doctor advising me to let Pat grow into whatever Pat's body decides. There would be no "surgical shoehorn" molding Pat's developing body to fit either side of the dichotomy (Fausto-Sterling 1993:91). The binary would have dissolved and science would "permit ambiguity" (Fausto-Sterling1993:91). Like the berdache[1], Pat would be celebrated. It would be understood that Pat was made by nature and nature is not to be questioned. This differs from the present practice of repairing nature's "mistakes" by science.

None of Pat's friends and schoolmates would be ashamed of modest homes or dirty old sneakers because families would have their needs taken care of. There would be no capitalists holding down parents' wages because of their own profits. In this society, members could honestly regard their interests "as the true interests of the whole society" because it would be representative of those looking out for their fellow-persons (Gilbert 1998:5). Members' realities would not be so totally removed from each other. Policy makers wouldn't dare toss around nine- and ten-digit figures about budgeting space travel programs without keeping in mind that children's education is a priority on the list of goals for society. No one's "security of their families or community depends on the oppression of others" (Allison 1993:271). No one has to have lives that "are mean and horrible" in order for someone else to live the good life (Allison 1993:271).

I envision a school with students who will look in their history books and think of the practices of class stratification, racism, sexism, and homophobia like we look at the medieval practices of bloodletting barbers. Just as the barbers were unaware of the way bodies work, "isms" will be seen as a result of not knowing how society works. Historical stigmatization on the basis of traits will be looked at with awe and students will understand society's past as being filled with ignorance. As the students flip throughout the text, they will be aware that this one book cannot give voice to the multiplicity of difference. They will realize that this is only one piece of people's heritage and past and know that this book's lessons are not supposed to reinforce privilege or guilt. This school will provide an environment in which students will not have to be "afraid of their own ignorance" (Tatum 2002:116). Children will not hesitate about asking questions about each other's experiences. They will question each other out of genuine interest and not the attempt to find some essential difference. Learning will be a process of recognizing the importance of group differences which leads to pride and understanding of experience as something that is not a universal experience (Kerchis & Young 1995). Children will be open about their families and the different shapes they take. Andy may have two moms while Jamie only lives with one dad. They will be proud of their parents and will be taught that love takes many different forms.

I see this school as a part of the future. These children will know that they can grow up to be anything and for them "anything" will not include the option to become a corporate CEO that ignores damage to community, families, or the environment in order to make profits.

"Anything" will not include plastic surgeons specializing in aesthetic breast augmentation or nose jobs. And, "anything" will not mean being a professional football star who is valued more than educators. This generation of children will have respect for one another. They will be allies and know to "look at...personal and social resources, evaluate the environment" they are helping "to create and decide what needs to be done" to make it better (Kivel 2002:127). Feagin and Vera (2002:125) write about moving toward an anti-racist Unites States by integrating "courses of oneness of all humankind" into educational systems. This is what I wish for Pat.

Endnote

1. The berdache tradition is diverse among Native American tribes. Those whose gender is androgynous have an accepted social status and important roles in many aspects of Native American life. For more information about the religion and ceremony surrounding berdaches see Walter L. Williams essay, "The Berdache Tradition," in in *The Meaning of Difference: American Constructions of Race, Sex and Gender, Social Class, and Sexual Orientation*, 2nd ed, ed. By Karen E. Rosenblum and Toni-Michelle C. Travis. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000.

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Main Street

Julia Nunnally Duncan

I come this evening to listen,
not to comment
or gain particular wisdom
from what I hear;
just to be—
perhaps to absorb aromas of coffee
taste sweetness of chocolate;
let my eyes peer
through the tall arched window
of this restored hotel
down onto Main Street,
once so familiar to me
and my kin;
I might see
a recognized face,
feel my youthful joy again
at being here
though I doubt it.
My residence now is farther
from this spot
than in years past,
so I don't rest here often.
But I have history here
in this hometown—
(Oh, how I trod barefoot
these streets in summer—
does anyone remember?)
—though this place's
home in my heart and mind
is vague now.
I will hear your words,
my poet friends,
but remain as ghostly
as the old stores
of this town's past—
the Roses five and dime,
with its aroma of fried hamburgers
wafting from the lunch counter
and noises of happy children
tromping down the long stairs

to aisles of toys
and tropical birds in cages,
exotic fish in aquariums;
the Belks department store
with displays of Sunday hats
and fragrant perfumes,
Boy Scout uniforms and men's tweed suits;
its bargain basement housing
old women's cotton dresses
and underwear;
work pants and work shoes
for the farmers and
textile and furniture hands;
and all the other
clothes stores
and shoe stores
and furniture stores
and hardware stores
and drug stores
and music stores,
all proud with
their carved moldings
and engraved metal ceilings,
polished hardwood or shiny vinyl floors,
and porcelain or crystal chandeliers
(alive with eager weekend shoppers)—
now lost except in the
memories of aging children
who once roamed the streets on Saturday
or in recollections in
fading minds of aged parents
who recall an even more glamorous
town of the 30's and 40's—
or settled with minds
closed forever in the dust of
graves at Oak Grove or
Memorial Park or
scores of little churchyards.

So forgive me if I have
nothing much to offer this evening
beyond this poem,
while I sit here and rest
and remember.

On the Rag

Bonnie Temple Cassara

I am a ragged, raggedy woman
Ragtime in my voice
Ragamuffin in my soul
Don't rag on me, not you too.
My man, my man, he say
I acts like I'm on the rag all the time:
But I say...

Listen to the rag in my voice.
Listen to the wolf, listen to the howl,
To the raw that travels on the edges
On the god forbidden edges
Of my words, of my song
Of my sweet, sweet soul
As it sings in added time.

So I tells my man—
I'll claim my rag bag and all
Those rag tag odds and loose ends,
All those unfinished pieces of myself,
And me, raggedy woman,
I will make a freedom ladder
And I will climb that
Raggedy, baggedy, raggedy, taggedy ladder
Right out my window
To my freedom.

And the stars in the starry night
Will stretch out their arms to me
'Cause they know I'm jus' mos' like them.
And the cities and the streetlights
And the grass and all them otherwise things
Will do the same

And this raggedy, baggedy,
Raggedy, taggedy ragamuffin woman
Will climb out that window
On her rag ladder
With all rag tag odds and loose ends of herself,
Every loose end flappin' in the wind
Precious, alive and free.

With no shame, with no fear
Saucy and smilin'
Knowing that ragtime
Is often just the best of times
And knowing those outstretched arms
In the sky and in the ground in the middle
—They wait for raggedy woman.

Drawing by Bonnie Temple Cassara

The Adjunct's Cycle

Gigi Derballa

Hurrying down the highway, hauling ass
Just trying to make it to my six o'clock class,
I'm a traveling teacher with an office in my trunk
Packed with books, pens, papers, and other junk
August's phone never stopped ringing for fall;
Now, I teach at three schools with ten classes in all.

So for now the bills will be paid
Though I question the choices I've made
With all the students I feel I must reach
I wonder how well I really do teach
So many papers and lessons to prepare
Maybe the students think I don't care.

December begins in a frenzy and ends with a break
But soon I've had all the holiday I can take.
Time off without pay isn't so great;
Now all my bill paying will be late.
I start with eight classes, but two don't make
My creditors will be calling to see if there's a mistake.

Late winter is the time for fever and cough,
And I watch my colleagues rush their children off
To the dentists and doctors and pharmacies galore,
Yet when my family is sick or feeling kinda sore
Unless it's some illness quite rare
We find relief with Bismol and Bayer.
Without insurance, doctors are too expensive
So with herbals and vitamins we go on the defensive.

By spring the full-timers go on trips
Conferences and workshops full of teaching tips.
I watch with envy for I wish I could go
Because I'm part-time, the answer's always "no,
It's not in our budget, maybe next year."
My God, I ask, what am I doing here?

By April I panic, no classes in sight
How'll I get through summer; will it be all right?
Maybe I should look for a job more stable
Yet leaving the classroom I love...I'm not sure I'm able.
Even though academia is my life,
Why must it be filled with such strife?
I borrow and beg and do what I can;
I'll pay back in the fall and start the cycle again.

Drawing by Joan Worth

They Won't Take 14-Year-Olds

Sandi Goodridge

Lisa Johnson told me in the copy room. I was hurriedly trying to finish some copies for my half-prepared creative writing students. "What do you think is going on?" she asked, frowning. "Oh, I'm just making some last minute copies," I chattered. "You know, the more creative the mind, the less organized." "No, I mean in New York," she looked for some recognition in my eyes. "Been here since 7:30, and we still don't get the Asheville paper or any local TV channels up on our mountain...what is it?"

Two concise sentences later, I was wobbling back down the hall with my copies. *Do I tell this class? What do I tell them? How will I, they, we handle it?*

I didn't want to risk making a big deal in case it was a hoax of some sort. So I dashed into my office and called my husband thinking the police detective should know. When I finally got through, Tim mumbled something about a terrorist named Bin Laden, "you know, the same one connected with the attempted attack on the Trade Center back in '93." "Oh yeah," I lied. "Wait a minute, the towers are going down!" he screamed into the phone. "I'll call you back."

No chance of a false alarm now, but I'm not good at split-minute decisions. What if I pretend I know nothing? At least they'll have two and one-half more hours of a normal Tuesday morning class.

So we shared our writings, talked about ideas for field trips. And I thought about how bad things might just get and how I loved this classroom full of people. For once, Creative had more than a handful, and not a sour grape among them. We sometimes read or talked through break time and got so involved in somebody's work that we forgot when class was over. They had things to contribute, things to share, and they were supportive of each other.

Photo by Rebecca Davis

And what a wide range of people! The whole universe right in one classroom: old, young, mature, admittedly immature, wise, experienced, naive, and beautiful. I wondered how they would react when they left the room and if they would be angry at me for not telling.

My own children say I'm too protective. I have always admired innocence, and some of these fragile adult children have had theirs jerked away from them far too early. I don't want to contribute to the overwhelming sense of fatalism students seem to catch like colds. Will they forgive me for covering their eyes for two and one-half little hours when I could have turned on the TV?

Lord, I hate television! We talked lightly about materialism and what a difference in the gap between "haves" and "have-nots" there seems to be. I thought of what little I knew about Osama Bin Laden. Wealthy, radical religious zealot who is jealous of our land; he'd really found our Achilles' heel. But I couldn't do it; I couldn't tell them.

Two minutes later it seemed, the class was over. Several students hung out for questions or advice. And then they were all gone without a clue. *Grief! I won't see them for a whole week, and who knows what will have happened by then? What a dummy I was not to tell them!* As I looked out the window which usually shows a crowd of folks around the commons area, I was reminded that I'd better go pick up my youngest at the local high school.

My last child, my last connection to innocence, Cory doesn't need any more trauma in his life even at 14. He's seen more dead people than *The Sixth Sense*. I watched him bounding out the door, talking full speed, telling me even more than I had found out from listening to the news on the way. "You should have seen that second one hit the tower! Wow! And people running around; they got some good close-ups of dead people too." He told me every single teacher let them watch. And his ROTC instructor said that plenty of people would be signing up for the military in the very near future. But they won't take 14-year-olds. It was going to be an important trip home for mom and son...thank God it takes so long to get up the mountain.

Carolyn Pidgeon

Dragonfly

Lonely,
the sound
of a dragonfly's wings,
scouting for mosquitoes
in the still
morning swamp
when the night sounds
sleep.

Ideas

Ideas,
Pure and hard as raisins,
No longer plump and juicy
as when first plucked
from the vine,
Staining our dreams purple

Irresponsibility

My life contained
in parentheses
doing what is expected and right
while others escape
and ramble with no thought:
run-on sentences
that leave confusion and mayhem
leaving me and others
to pick up the fragments
and make sense of them.
And then
to bind the wounds inflicted
by the broken pieces.

To Helen

Once a year we wrote
Christmas letters, hand-written
not the reproducible kind.
Stories of your husband
chasing a neighbor's recalcitrant bull
from your friendly pasture,
worrying he was working too hard.
Visiting successful children
who lived too far,
new grandbabies you longed to hold
suddenly gone off to college

Eyes going bad
but still seeing the moon glow
over the hayfield and the new
schoolhouse
in a town that was always yours.

In twenty years
I never saw you.
My paths never passed
your front porch.
Yet countless times
I sat in your linoleumed kitchen
by the brown metal stove
sharing cake or cobbler
while the big collie dog
barked at the screen door...
talking about children and roses.

Drawing by Joan Worth

Skin Deep

Gerald A. Metz

I

There was something about Doris's skin that reminded me of the wallpaper in Granny's bedroom, only her skin was more interesting to look at. With sunlight shining brightly into it, a random pink stippling glowed from deep inside. I imagined what it would feel like to touch that skin, but I knew touching was forbidden and she wouldn't understand it if I did, and I also knew I was in love with Doris and that the folks thought it was amusing when I said so at the dinner table.

"Doris?" they smiled. "Doris what?"

"Schlossberg," I said, and their amusement bumped up the scale another notch though they tried to hide it and I couldn't see what was so funny. Back then I didn't know what a WASP was even though theoretically I was one.

My seat was near the window, and hers was just to my right, so in the morning when the sun streamed into our first grade classroom it always made her skin do that mottled thing. I had to watch out of the corner of my eye so she wouldn't know. I thought of asking some of the other kids if they had noticed Doris's skin, but I had the feeling they would just sit there and look at me so I never said anything.

II

Starting around eighth grade it took courage to look at myself in the mirror. There was always one on my nose, or next to it, "plain as the nose on your face," which, in my case, gave it star billing. By the time I was done with the damned prescription soap that smelled like my old chemistry set, it was time for a tactical appraisal that included some tentative squeezes to see which ones might be ripe for picking. After pinging a few cores off the mirror, I'd be on a roll and invariably try to gut one that wasn't ready to go and I could see I was going to be stuck with a nasty zit the size of a nickel for days or even a week or two, so why couldn't I just quit while I was ahead? My clinical hunches were getting better but I was so fascinated by the possibility of a successful squeeze that I took too many chances. I

made careless mistakes like using a hairpin or a paper clip to attack a blackhead that still had a red ring around it, as if I didn't know by now to wait for the color to fade before pressing it out. As a result I'd get stuck with an Olympic hard splotch that felt like a sore B-B under the surface and took a week for the color to fade. The hardness took even longer. It wasn't like I could make one disappear just by emptying it. I don't know why I squeezed the ones that weren't really ripe: it was like eating peanuts—which, of course, I couldn't do any more. Or chocolate—like swearing off made any difference. I'd tear off a couple of squares of toilet paper and put pressure on the worst of the bleeding zits with one hand, tidying up the bathroom mirror with the other. I was tired of hearing complaints about that messy mirror. Big sin. Like leaving the seat up.

The face fuzz was another problem. Whether it was better to use my new Remington, in which case I should remember to shave before picking my pimples to avoid getting blood and ooze into the razor...or to give up and use a Gillette blade and do a better job with the whiskers but end up shaving the high spots off the worst of the eruptions, creating oozers that would need pressure all through breakfast just to stop the bleeding. If shaving the heads off would have killed the dumb things, I could have stood it—heck, I'd have preferred it!—but it just added to the general mess and didn't make Mom any happier.

She never said much, but as I strolled quietly into the kitchen she'd shoot me an anxious glance and I'd see the lines thicken between her eyebrows; her cheeks and lower lids would ride up into a squinting disapproval that was pain or pity or probably a bit of both. Her glance hit me and bounced back like pus off the mirror and I felt ashamed and helpless. I wished I could say, "I'm still me," even though I didn't look like me any more, and I'd have done anything to make it all different and I know she would have, too, but we couldn't and we both knew that. The few times we broke silence we ended up hurting each other. She'd make a remark about wishing I wouldn't come to the breakfast table with a fresh-squeezed face, but I'd just grunt because it wasn't funny any more.

Then she got the idea maybe the Mayo Clinic could clear up my skin. The Mayo Clinic, for god's sake! That made me feel like an even bigger freak but off I went for a week of hot sulfur compresses and big doses of vitamin A and "acne surgery," nothing more than their attempt to squeeze my zits with fancier equipment that didn't do any better than I could with my own two fingers. Experience counts for something in

this world after all, and I knew my own skin better than they did out in Minnesota. Struck out. Still spotted. I flew back home and as I met her, Mom's face showed she had expected better of me. There were people watching us, but I broke the teen-age taboo and hugged my mother: I needed to know she'd hug back, that I was not a leper after all, and besides if my head was buried on her shoulder she couldn't see my face. Her skin, unscarred, was so soft and warm!

III

It had seemed like a good idea, but the business of going to the dance dressed as a clown was turning out to be a triumph of technology over common sense, and I was starting to feel sick inside. Clearly I'd overplayed my hand and I felt more hollow with every wrong guess my high school classmates made. It was bad enough to be a nerdy geek in class, but here at the gym I was surrounded by fraternity jocks and cheerleaders as they inspected my blinking nose, droopy rubber ears and oversized feet. They called out the names of the "in" crowd, trying to guess who could possibly be tucked inside such an improbably zany outfit, and I started to imagine their disappointment when I would finally unmask and they would see that it was only me. By the end I was feeling like a bigger clown than the one I was trying to portray.

I had considered putting on clown makeup instead of wearing a mask, which would have had the indirect advantage of covering my zits and acne scars but I chucked that idea on the grounds that the oily makeup might start a plague of pus even more repulsive than usual. Maybe I was afraid that the traditional red clown spots on a greasy white background would not be sufficiently different from my usual carbuncular appearance to constitute any kind of disguise. I finally convinced myself that a mask was the best platform for the blinking nose light I had made in Electrical Shop, and everything else followed from that.

Now I'd have to face the music, which was past the crescendo of wrong guesses, and the pace of possibilities was petering out like the sound a popcorn popper makes near the end of a batch. They never did guess my name, and when the mask finally came off a few said, "Oh..." and turned away, eager to guess the identity of newer and more important arrivals. I also turned away. And learned my place. As if I hadn't already known. How could I have been such a fool?

But even fools have dreams, and here I was at the Halloween dance with the star of my nocturnal fascinations, Judy Januszczyk. In my mind I could relive every encounter, every scrap of conversation, every accidental meeting in the hall, even the way my arm felt when hers brushed up against me that one time when we were in the cafeteria line. Electricity! I didn't have the nerve to sit with her and if I had I'd have been mute.

Her family was Polish, one of many that had come to the Triple Cities to work at Endicott Johnson years ago. As far as I knew she was Catholic, which only added to the mystery and the appeal though I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because her ethnicity and religion kept her out of the WASP clique that also excluded me for reasons I couldn't fathom but had sorrowfully accepted. I had the hope that our shared alienation from the beautiful people might make her more attainable, and on that score I had a very active imagination. I savored another replay of that time her arm touched mine and marveled again at its incandescent impact: I had marked the spot with a pen and avoided washing it for at least two weeks. By then the ink had faded but not the memory.

She sat two rows in front of me in home room and one row to the right, a knight's move in chess, and that gave me the chance to worship her left cheek, the upper part of her left ear where it sometimes showed between the strands of her silky black hair and, if her elbows weren't on the desk, her budding left breast. I would come to class early in hopes of having enough time to study Judy and savor the churning warmth it generated deep in my belly.

It must have been masochism that made me ask her to go with me to the dance, but I pushed myself and braced for rejection. She said Yes! I was stuck for the next line of dialogue: my tongue completely disconnected from my brain and the furious realization that I was coming across as even more of a nerd than usual did nothing to get it going again.

And now here we were at the dance. What next? I had developed a good memory for sensual encounters but the art of seduction hadn't kicked in yet: I didn't have a clue how to fulfill the promise of an evening that had seemed so magical in my imagination but so threatening at close range.

The shoe polish for my new white bucks reminded me of the milky acne medicine I daubed with dutiful optimism on my face at bedtime every night. I had painted a fresh coat of polish on the shoes being

careful not to smudge any on the red rubber edges of the soles, but I hadn't tried to dance with shoes that wanted to stick to the hardwood floor of the gym, and my tongue was as immobilized as my feet. True, I was getting a chance to put an arm around Judy and to hold her hand, and that let a strange joy percolate through my body at the same time it made the whole setting more desperate. I was dressed like a fool, and I felt like one.

The evening was a farce. No goodnight kiss. We never went out again. I never forgot her.

IV

epidermis pl. *epider'mides* [MeSH: Epidermis] the outermost and nonvascular layer of the skin, derived from embryonic ectoderm, varying in thickness from 0.07 to 0.12 mm, except on the palms and soles where it may be 0.8 and 1.4 mm, respectively.

Dorland's Medical Dictionary

My name echoes in the hospital corridors. "Report to the ER."

I'm the AR on this shift, the Assistant Resident in General Surgery. I'm hot stuff and I know it. The nurses know it, too. They follow my orders, tune in to my mood, and smile when I look up and see them watching me. I'm batting .500: for every one who turns down an invitation to sneak into the Staff House after hours, there's another one who will. I feel like I own the place, maybe because I'm here almost all the time. Literally a resident.

My white coat whooshes down the halls. The patient is a senior from Syracuse who was sliding down an icy hill on a piece of cardboard with some sorority sisters when she ran over something sharp embedded in the ice and it slashed open her jeans and about three inches of her left bun. Her big eyes are red, but the tears have dried on her high cheek bones. Classic skull. Stunning symmetry. The record says she's from Vestal. Name is Januszczyk. Small world! With that name she's got to be Judy's little sister. I didn't even know Judy *had* a little sister!
I nod politely and introduce myself.

I consider what suture might be adequate to the challenge of restoring that slashed surface, mooning at me like half of a sliced melon laid drippy-side down. I choose 5-0 nylon and a running subcuticular stitch, not only because it'll give the best result but because it'll take about three times as long to place as interrupted

sutures, and she'll have to come back so I can take them out. I'll schedule her to return Saturday afternoon.

While I'm calculating all this I'm shooting in the 2% Lidocaine and prepping the skin with pHisoHex on a saline-soaked four by four. Start at the wound edges and work outward, scrubbing in a spiral, slowly. Now another sponge, and do it again. Bubbles appear in the blob of thick white cream I'm spreading over her skin, her sacred skin, her wonderful warm resilient skin that moves round and round with the friction of my sponge; back and forth it complies yet pushes against me with a gelatinous resistance that makes me lose track of time. My ears ring. Have I prepped enough? Probably too much. I can't let her realize that.

I put on sterile gloves and take the folded green drape off the top layer of the suture tray that's balanced at elbow height on a nearby Mayo stand and fluff open the drape and drop it onto the summit of the lovely mound of her poor split gluteal epidermis, the sheet rising like a curtain, neatly framing the stage where my next act will take place, a solo performance. No audience: just the two of us, thinking our own thoughts, my mind falling into the groove of a role I've played so often this semester I can do it in the middle of the night, again and again, without fatigue, and she, lying there, not knowing quite what to expect, her face turned away from me, the crest of her ear cutting through the straight blackness of her hair, the contours of her thorax retreating into the mattress: a goddess, perfection personified except for the dripping gash that cries out for my healing touch.

As I reach for the toothed forceps and needle holder every *erector pili* muscle in my forearms tightens and goose bumps rise as a wave of unaccustomed exultation sweeps over the entire extent of my skin. I am almost paralyzed in the grip of glory and it's obvious I need to say something casual to divert the headlong rush of this strange stream.

"Januszczyk." I say. "You from Vestal?"

"Yeah. How'd ya know?"

"Judy. I was in her class."

Of Kites and Dreams

Margaret Darnell

My dreams are kites in the strong March breeze;
They rise and soar whenever I please.
They dip and tip as the wind zips past.
Are they strong and sturdy enough to last,
To weather the blasts of stormy gales,
To endure the lull of Life's delay?
No, I must firmly clutch the strings
Or else my dreams will slip away!

Drawing by Joyce Dover

Killer Rolls

Charles DeVries

Racing from the cramped car across sunbaked grass and sand, into that memory-evoking aroma of my grandmother's kitchen.

The smell of cinnamon rolls from the oven, as well as the lingering sense of many batches of French bread.

My small hands tired after the mixing and the kneading, yet captured by the feel of the dough and the magic of the creation.

With the crackling of the cooling bread, I was awakened to the uncontrollable desire to break open a loaf and take in the pungent earthiness.

I was transformed into another world, leaving me in awe of the power of the senses.

• • •

With all that is going on, nobody is going to notice that another cinnamon roll will be missing. The grown-ups are trying to get some sort of consensus of where we are off to: the ocean or the ponds. Big decision to make when you are on vacation.

There goes another roll; they go down too easy when they just come out of the oven. My mother says Grandmere shouldn't be doing all this baking; maybe she's right....No way! This one has to be disguised; just close your mouth when you see someone, then chew real fast. Everyone is piling into cars, heads are counted . . . one more. . . .

I never believed anyone when they said you had to wait after you eat to go swimming. My father pulled me out after I doubled up and started floating in the water.

They sure did taste good....

Drawing by Joan Worth

She

Thomas Gore

She's taking him upstairs. Now.

My knuckles burn white around the steering wheel. My heart slams at my temples. Tremors begin in my arms, and I close my eyes, push the memories away.

I am in control.

I take a deep breath and open my eyes.

Looking up, I watch as the lights come on in her apartment on the second floor. Two silhouettes move behind the thin curtains, touching hands, arms, lips. My eyes drift closed.

I am in control.

I touch the gun in my belt, stab the cigarette out into the tray and step out of the car. This neighborhood threatens me. Its eyes bore into my back. The buildings jut from the ground like rotted teeth, and the street lamps do little to lift the darkness. Shudders break out across my spine.

I am in control.

I slam the door behind me and cross the street. Overhead, the lights dim in her window and I feel my fists clenching.

There have been so many now, but there will be no more. I will make certain of that.

The door squeals in protest as I push it open. I step across the threshold and my knees grow weak. Stale sweat and urine assault my nostrils, and I cover my mouth and nose with my hand and try not to retch. Voices seep from behind closed door: moans, cries, a television, maybe. Farther down the hall, a man glares at me, unblinking.

He is unimportant. I am here only for her. The years have been so long, and she must be made to understand. I will make her remember, before she dies.

I climb the darkened stairwell and swallow through my tightened throat. My stomach clenches with every step I take. My heart pounds as I reach the landing, where a naked yellow bulb casts shadows into corners.

I lean against the wall, close my eyes, and take several deep breaths. I remember the first one, and I remember what she did to him.

I am in control.

I squeeze the bridge of my nose and wipe the sweat from my forehead before opening my eyes. There, across the landing, is her door. I hear the ragged breath in my throat as I sidestep the rotting floorboards to lean my ear against the door. I hear muffled thumps, lilting laughter, and my eyes flutter closed.

Her face is so clear in my mind. Her eyes, her hair, her smile … made up for all of them. Such a waste.

My knees seem to liquefy, and my hands tremble. I press my eyes with my thumbs and dissolve her image into fading sparks.

I am in control.

Gently, I turn the doorknob, but find it locked. I glance over my shoulder to see if I am alone and pull the wire from my pocket. It slips easily into the lock, and I lean forward, licking the sweat from my upper lip. I squeeze the knob and jiggle the wire, trying to absorb the sounds with my hand. The quiet snick is as loud as a gunshot in my ears.

My pulse beats at my temples as I count the seconds until I hear laughter again. A held breath escapes me.

I nudge the door open far enough to peer inside.

Shadows dance across the wall as candles flicker. I hear giggling and moaning, and I know it is she. Incense hangs pungent in the air, trying to cover another scent. Something all too familiar.

I take the gun from my belt, inhale deeply, try to ignore my pounding heart, count to three, and crash the door open with my shoulder as I raise the gun. The shadows on the wall stop their dance.

Both are on the bed, frozen. The blood appears black in the dim light, and binding his wrists to the frame is black electrical tape. His head hangs back, his mouth hangs open, and his eyes stare without seeing at the ceiling.

I remember the others, their faces skinned away, their chests puckered with wounds, the same grisly signature carved into the skin. Every one of them tied. Every one of them him.

I remember the captain telling me it was over, that I was off the case because I was getting too close. Letting her interfere.

I remember my brother's face. Hanging from the wall.

I am in control.

She's screaming now, charging me with the knife above her head. I yell at her to give it up and begin to pull the trigger as I step back. Wood splinters, a sharp pain shoots up my leg, the gun fires, and I hear glass shatter somewhere across the room. I stumble, and the gun clatters across the floor. I look at the body on the bed and know what it will look like without a face.

Her eyes gleam with fury, and I struggle to keep her gnashing teeth from my face. Blood shines on her pale skin, pink foam drips from her mouth, and she snarls. She kicks my ankle, pain fires up my leg, and my hand slips. She raises the knife. Again.

And again.

I am in control.

Illumination

Diana LaSpada

An angel came and swept
a lava finger 'cross the lake,
sprinkling drops of melted sunshine
upon a choppy wake.

A summer mallard waded
into the sifted light
and for a mystic moment
was completely lost from sight.

Acrylic painting by Diana LaSpada

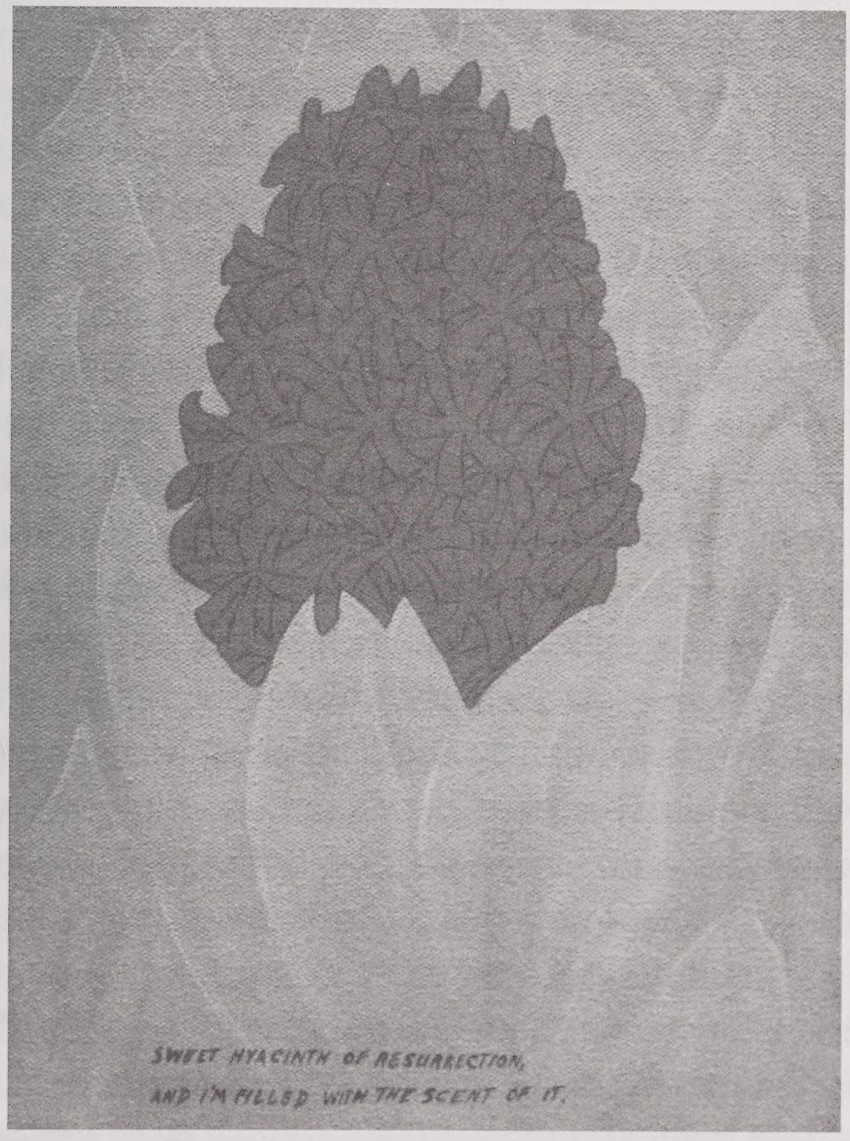
Fruition

Diana LaSpada

Torches in a temple burning
swell in ardor's raw contrition,
prosper in lowly exultation,
celebrate a eucharist.

Like Apollo's fecund noon,
these fertile fires spark parturition,
sweet hyacinth of resurrection
and I'm filled with the scent of it.

John 12:3



Acrylic painting by Diana LaSpada

Nona and the Moon

Gabrielle M. Thompson

My mother left on my second birthday. She gave me to my Nona, my grandmother, "with a pitifully small cardboard box of clothes and half a bag of disposable diapers," according to Nona's often-told story. Nona said Mama took so many drugs, it's amazing I made it through those first two years. My mother had not been married to my father, but lived with him for three years. He had abandoned us on my first birthday. I've never been much on celebrating birthdays.

Life with Nona wasn't ever easy, but we loved each other, and survived. Our old trailer leaked the cold all winter and was a tinderbox in the summer. Nona worked at a kid's camp, slinging hash through the summers, and I went along and helped wherever I could—two for the price of one. In the winter we made do with what we could preserve and dry from the vegetable garden they let us grow at the camp. Like I said, it wasn't easy, but we managed. At least until the last few years.

Grandmother was adept at wildcrafting and could locate any herb in our mountains to cure whatever ailed us—I'd never had so much as a baby aspirin pass my lips. In fall, we'd take our old burgundy Plymouth up to the Grandfather, the oldest mountain on this continent, and search the crags for the plants that would see our health through another year.

I asked her once why we lived here, in the foothills below Grandfather Mountain, instead of on the reservation, since she was half-Cherokee. She said she'd left there as a child after her uncle abused her, and she was never going back. Even when the casino was built and they started handing out money to everyone, I couldn't convince her to return. "A person's got to stand on their own two feet, make their way," she would say. My father sent a Christmas card when I was twelve, but never offered a penny for my care. Nona wouldn't ask. We figured Mama was dead.

Nona said she'd never leave the Grandfather. In early spring and fall, he was shrouded from our view in mist, but in the summer and winter he towered over us, his hard gray profile carved with gorges deep, much like the tracks separating my grandmother's cheeks and mouth. In many ways she seemed as ancient as the mountain she loved.

I loved the mountain, too. Especially in winter, when it stood silhouette against the gold lamÈ of sunset, the deciduous trees skeletal as they climbed its cliffs. When the full moon rose over the cragged edge, Grandmother would say it was a reflection of my round Cherokee face. My

hair, thick and straight to my waist, mirrored the surrounding night. "You'll take your strength from that moon, girl. Say your prayers to that moon. It watches over you like the Grandfather watches over me."

One certainty I grew up with was that Nona would never take up liquor—she had always told me that she couldn't handle even a bit of booze or drugs. But, she started drinking when we got the letter. Mama wanted to see us; she and her new beau were coming for a visit. She was an artist now and lived in Oregon, painting pictures of the fern-filled forests, which she sold to tourists. Grandmother said, "Maybe you were right. Maybe we should have moved back to the reservation instead of staying where Doris could find us."

I wrote her and told her not to come. I didn't want her. I didn't want to see her. She'd waited thirteen years to let us know she was alive; well, we just didn't care anymore. We'd buried her, in our hearts, long ago.

I got a work permit that summer, and the camp had to start paying me for my time. Just as well. Grandmother's morning headaches made her pretty much useless. By afternoon, though, she would come around enough to be able to help in the garden, only to fall to the bottom of the bottle with the encroaching darkness. I tried dumping the wine down the sink, but she'd just climb into the old Plymouth and go buy more. We didn't have enough to spare for what she managed to drink—so there was no point in pouring it down the drain. We fought, too. Nona had never been a yeller, but in the depression of drink she would scream about how everyone took advantage of her all her life—me included. It was payback time. I could support her, now that I was able.

When school started in the fall, I had trouble keeping up. I studied in my room, as much as I could, but Nona invited "friends" over who brought beer and leered at me when I'd venture into the front room to turn down the radio or the television. She would yell at me, tell me to fix something for dinner and go back to my room. The drunken bickering beyond my closed door would last long into the night. More than once, the blue flash of the law brought me out of a semi-sleep as neighbors fought back against the revelry or screaming fights. The only time Nona ever got violent with one of her buddies was when an old coot grabbed my ass as I passed through the room, cheese sandwich in hand. She chased him out the door with a fry pan aiming for his head, smacking his shoulder. That was the best laugh we'd had in months. My studies weren't going well, but band was my joy. Marching across the football field, playing the clarinet, I was somebody. I never had enough of anything to be noticed at school—a poor kid is often invisible, which beats being picked on. I didn't mind being solitary; it was

my nature. A trombone player took to tripping me, easy to do as uncoordinated as I'd always been. Jimmy was eighteen, and a junior. He was born wearing a baseball cap, puffy through the middle, and had a truck with a gun rack in the back window. He'd flipped it coming down high school hill the first week of school, and had to be airlifted to Johnson City for concussion—seatbelts were not his style and he'd been thrown out of the cab. He invited me to Wendy's after homecoming. The dented-but-running truck was filled with discarded wrappers of past burgers and fries, and crusted-over shake cups. I didn't know which smelled worse, it or his breath when he kissed me, chaw lodged under his lip.

Doris showed up on Christmas, having come across country by "the dog bus." She said that's about all that rode it, anymore. "I wanted to drive out, but Regie said his car wouldn't make it across country and back. That's probably true, but I think it was his excuse not to have to come along. But I had to see you—oh, I've missed you so much!" She brought lots of photographs and a few paintings, showing us the fertile green of her place. Rained a lot, she said. Nona acted like Mama had never been gone. Friendly as can be. I wanted to stay mad, but Doris had a way of getting around you, making you smile even when you tried your hardest not to. Grandma didn't drink as much, and we went sightseeing, Doris footing the bill. I'd never been in the paying part of Grandfather Mountain, and Nona insisted we all go up to the top on New Year's Day. We bundled up and were on the Mile High Swinging Bridge at 10:00 AM, freezing to death even though we'd dressed for the cold. It was 17 degrees and the wind chill brought that down to 6 degrees. The winter sun shone with a brilliant glare and the sky was that special blue that makes you feel like life is worth living, so the cold was tolerable. Once we crossed the bridge to the massive boulder on the other side, Nona said a prayer to Tanawha, or Great Hawk, the Cherokee name for the Grandfather. We raced back down to our old car, the only one in the parking lot. The wind shook the Plymouth and seeped through the cracks around the doors. Nona made us be still and listen. At first, we thought it was the wind's moaning she wanted us to hear—then we caught the low, sonorous bell-tone that emitted like a clarion call from deep within the ancient stone. Doris asked if the sound was the bridge vibrating in the wind, but Grandmother smiled, and started the engine. "The Grandfather," she said, "is 65 million years old. He has his hidden secrets, and powers, which he shares with those who invoke his name." At the Nature Museum, we watched the movies about Mildred the Bear and the history of the mountain, followed by lunch at the restaurant. In the animal compound the bears were hibernating, of course, but the cougars curled together below the overhang

in their compound, licking one another. The deep rumble of their growl-purr floated softly on the breeze. We drove from there down to Charlotte, where we spent the night in a motel, another first for me. Doris and Nona went to the Comedy Club, and I was happy to stay in the room and have the television remote to myself with all those channels—we could only pick up two fuzzy ones at home.

Doris agreed with Nona that Jimmy was a pitiful excuse for a boyfriend. He came over a couple of times, but his slovenly appearance and sullen responses were all they could talk about after he'd leave. That, and the fact he always had to be touching me—putting his arm around my shoulder, pulling me onto his lap, pushing my hair out of my face, stuff like that. I had to hear every kind of lecture on sex, even though I told them we weren't doing the big nasty. To be truthful, I didn't much like kissing him. But he was the first person to ever pay me any attention, and I did like that.

Doris had to spoil it all before she left, begging me to go back with her, give Oregon a try. "Suit yourself," Nona said. I told her I wasn't leaving. When the drinking got so bad afterward, I wondered if I'd made the wrong choice. But it was payback time. I couldn't leave her.

I was sixteen on Valentine's Day. Jimmy gave me a thin band of silver and asked me to marry him. I wanted to be engaged—just kinda wished it was somebody else. I wasn't sure if he really wanted to get married—we didn't have any place to live as man and wife and he bagged groceries after school at the Food Lion—or if he was just tired of playing with my titties and wanted to move onto the real thing. I took the ring as a birthday present and told him I'd think about the other.

Nona decided it for me. On the first of March we had an ice storm. I'd gone to bed, leaving her to her bottle and remorse. Sadness and tears were her accompaniment when she was drinking alone. She'd finished the bottle and must have decided to go for another. I woke to the blue flash, this time in silence. The Plymouth had skidded out of control at the bottom of our hill and, not wearing her seatbelt, Nona had gone through the windshield.

Doris didn't make the funeral, but offered me a bus ticket west. Jimmy came to console me and never left. He throws food wrappers and his dirty underwear on my floor. Easier to pick up than empty bottles.

I watch the full moon caress the Grandfather, and my lethargy tells me I'll stay. The trailer and this little spit of land are all I have left of Nona—that and her stories. I scattered her ashes from the highest peak of Tanawha. Now it is her face, not mine, I see in the rising moon. I imagine the camp will hire me back for the summer. Jimmy says he loves me. I'll survive.

Drawing by Judy Borum

Georgia's Quilt

Jennifer Browning

She collected the scraps for years.
The green was from Daddy's overcoat.
He'd worn it in the War.
He'd had it on the day he marched away from her.
They mailed it back.
He had been so proud of that damn coat.
Said it would help him on the front.
Help him come home.
His body was in France.
His coat came home.

The white of a gown beds beside the green.
Wedding and death always together sewn
with the bitter threads of a widow's hand.
The veil, the pearls, all gone into a trunk to be looked at
when melancholy strikes.
But the gown of satin marries the emerald of wool.
Ever their fates betwined.

And, now the blue taken from a baby's crib.
The son now grown with babies of his own.
A man with a father's face— the kind
eyes, strong nose and hair the shade of gold gone pale.
Husband, friend, son and father all combined.
No one else around—only the one.

Her hands grow tired in their stitch.
The thread leaks out over the satin, wool and cotton.
Piece by piece
The quilt tells her story.
Once maiden, once wife, once widow, now
old.

The Buttons

Celia H. Miles

Holly twisted the thread connecting the purple button on her blazer cuff and kept twisting it, concentrating on its double thickness, determined to conquer, to separate the button from its indented space. She knew that the woman sitting opposite had been watching for some time, maybe willing the button to resist. As the thread broke, Holly had the urge to push the purple button up her own nose, to astonish the woman, to cause some small degree of consternation in the room. She stared at the button, balancing it on an upturned forefinger, tempted to bring it to her nostril.

"Mrs. Noland, please." The nurse waited for Holly to precede her into Dr. Wesson's office. Holly looked at the button and then pushed it into the fake soil of the fake plant on the table beside the green vinyl sofa. Holly winked at the woman whose mouth was now a little *o* and followed the nurse.

"No luck this time, Mrs. Noland." The doctor snapped something shut with a click. "Don't give up hope yet." He washed his hands. "I'm referring you to a colleague in Baltimore. Dr. Dannois has a reputation for cracking tough cases." He handed a slip of paper to the nurse. "The office will set up the appointment." One more woman trying to get pregnant. In this case, one more defeat for him.

Dr. Dannois' office was small, decorated in pastels: pink and blue and yellow. The flowers were real, the sofa a soft floral fabric. Holly waited with one other patient, a girl, surely too young to be here. Holly's suit had brass buttons imprinted with lions. She started working on the lowest button on the jacket, the most accessible. She waited two hours in Dr. Dannois' office and the button perversely took forever. She twisted methodically minute after minute until the girl could not ignore the activity but could not acknowledge it either. She inspected the prints of hovering sea gulls, leaving Holly to concentrate furiously. The thread broke after a final brutal twist and the button rolled down Holly's thigh and under the nearby table. Holly looked with satisfaction at its space and got down on her knees to seek the button. She wiped wisps of dust lint from it as if brushing straw from a boy's curls. Approaching the plant, she poked her finger into the soft dirt, shoving the button close to the roots of the tulip. The nurse announced: "Mrs. Noland, this way please." The girl turned and Holly lifted her eyebrows elaborately, as if they'd shared a joke.

"I want you to see Dr. Meizel, as soon as he can set up an appointment." Dr. Dannois semi-slumped into a chair opposite Holly. "He's the best. I think you'll like him." Holly breathed deeply and stood. When she extended her hand, Dr. Dannois almost missed the gesture, turning as she was to make a final notation on the chart. "Ah, yes," she murmured. "And let me know, will you?"

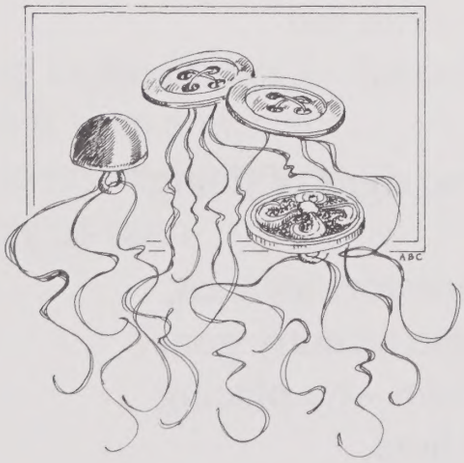
In the waiting room, Holly worried first one fine white button, then another from the double-buttoned cuff of her white blouse. As she twisted and pulled, she noticed the tiny freckles adorning the top of her hand but she did not allow them to distract her. Her intense concentration drew attention. One woman stopped reading *Parents* and simply stared, her lips slightly pursed. Another slopped a splash of coffee at the urn. Holly spent more than twenty minutes on the first button, seventeen on the next. The *Parents* reader clocked the second and breathed audibly when the button lay in Holly's hand, cupped with the other one. When the nurse appeared, Holly stood straight and smiled. She took the buttons over to the large Ficus tree in the corner and, while the nurse held the door open, Holly carefully planted the buttons fairly close to each other. Brushing her soiled hands on her blue linen skirt, she wrinkled her nose and went into Dr. Meizel's office.

"What's this thing?" Dr. Wesson's receptionist, dusting the office plants, thought she saw a purple blossom among what she knew were fake flowers.

"What in the world?" Dr. Dannois' nurse examined the strangely golden, brassy looking tulip bloom.

"Strange," Dr. Meizel's patient said. Two little white flowers seemed out of place under the Ficus tree.

And miles away, Holly slept with her newborns cradled close.



Drawing by Annie Cicale

A Past and Present Moment

Dara Llewellyn

Warning others of the poisonous coral,
how touching it
is to die,
I sink into dark depths,
needing no mask.

With sure and certain strokes,
I know the streaming way
to the brightly lit house
below the swollen sea.

Illumination spilling from the windows,
gleaming in the shadowy deep,
the house sits pristine, eternal,
waiting for my presence—below.

I glide in through a portal,
the gleaming floor lying before me.
Barren now of furniture,
each room remains intact.

I wonder at the emptiness
so richly filled before, with
presences that murmured, far
from a familiar shore.

Then, in a hidden recess,
I chance upon a curtain rod
and, nearby, two folded, silken drapes.

Should I hang these signs of living?

But what if my ancestors awaken,
those long and those recently gone?
What if I startle them—by placing
some new thing where
nothing had been before?

No, the house must remain empty.

Admitting the echoes have fled,
I turn for one last look at this dear space,
storing memories for time yet ahead.

And there, just for a moment—slipping into the room,
a figure in a dark gleaming wet suit
swims surely through the shadowy gloom,
pauses, then swims out the portal.

I wander where the figure had been swimming
but the room is unchanged from before.
Then, through a window,
I see outward—
to drifting, green, willowy forms.

I, too, move out through the portal,
tracing the sides of my sea home.
I swim round each corner slowly,
stroking through long fronds over sea stones.

The house shows small signs of decay:
moldy smears mar the sparkling white;
crumbling stones now litter the sea floor—
showing evidence of loss and blight.

I swim outward now, looking back at my shelter
already diminishing in light and in form.
I know I am leaving all its comforts—
its sighs, its smells, and its warmth.

I turn and stroke up to the heavens,
moving through dark time and space.
I wake to a new cloudy morning and
to water now falling as rain.

St. Francis and the Playboy Bunny

Randee Goodstadt

A charming Tudor house
near my neighborhood
Is graced with a nice St. Francis in its garden.

It's me who is knocked off balance by
The Playboy Bunny in their car,
hanging from the rearview mirror.

Don't they know not to mix metaphors,
That perfect saints of compassion rarely associate
With nubile, naked women?
(At least not the ones who haven't repented.)

May 14, 2001: Martin Luther King Boulevard

Randee Goodstadt

Pizza for breakfast.
Those birdies don't mind,
Feasting on remnants
Someone left behind.

Then a little ways further
Fresh rabbit for crow.
Our fine feathered friends
Get their breakfast "to go."

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Shell-Shocked

Chris Smart

The night was black with no hint of light. It was as if a huge, dark hole had swallowed the world. The air was still and crisp, the silence unnerving. I could hear the pounding of my heart in a rhythmic tribal drum beat. The squad was making its way toward the objective when it happened. Suddenly, flares lit the sky like a grand Fourth of July celebration. With the sky glowing like high noon, the squad hit the ground and started crawling toward the objective. The white hot flares soon burned out and the darkness returned. Having lost any night vision I had prior to the flares, the dark thickened ten-fold. I had no sense of the position of the rest of the squad. I lay still for a moment hoping to hear sounds of soldiers crawling through the brush. In the next instant a concussion shook the ground beneath me and the blast that followed was deafening. With that single blast, chaos erupted. Machine gun tracer fire lit up the thick darkness like fire flies being shot from cannons. The concussions continued to pop one after another like we were in a giant popcorn popper. I crawled feverishly trying to stay clear of the blasts. Every breath burned like a hot poker in my chest as I sucked icy air into my lungs. With the machine gun fire overhead and the concussions blasting from every direction, I crawled from the brush into sand. The loosely packed sand made movement incredibly difficult, and my pace slowed. I felt my lungs would burst at any moment like an over-filled helium balloon. From the light of the tracer fire, I could see a structure not far away. I crawled through the sand, under barbed wire and into depressions until I made it to the small building. Several camo-covered individuals with night vision goggles peered out. They told me to move on to a staging area several hundred meters away. I ran as if my life depended on how fast I got to the shelter. I arrived at the large, green tent barely visible through camouflage netting and entered. Members of the squad who had made it through the course before me sat solitarily around the tent. No one spoke a word. Their faces looked hollow. Even though it was only an exercise, the reality was all too real.

In the years since and in light of recent events, I've pondered this experience. Realizing the depth of my fear and anxiety, I can't fathom the thoughts of the men and women who have experienced combat for real. Please take a moment to reflect on the sacrifices made for our freedom.

Joshua Bienko

Untitled

Let the dew of grass seep into my mind's soil. Let the words bleed from my hand as if my veins were filled with ink that does not run out. Let smoke enter and toggle my blood and oxygen. Let the pattern of my fingerprint drive me insane and the detail of rain do the same. Let the wisdom of animals humble me. Let the annoyance of smiling make my face patient. Let colors absorb themselves into my eyes and senses. Let them confuse themselves in my memory and become schizophrenic so their qualities and shapes melt into one indefinable entity. Let anger overcome me in my sleep.... Let history make itself clear and then change. Let the poets passed be resurrected through my hand and allow their lives and their loves be my paper so that my ink impregnates them and their children can watch my audience ignore and walk by. Let the vibration of silence become deafening.

Dry wood is at the door cracking away at the visitor. Mud will grab hold of your feet and not let go. Let eyelashes fall out and be recognized for their fragility and power. Turn oxygen into paint so it is what I live and breathe. Let mistakes take over our literature and misspelled words fill our dictionaries and become our new vocabulary. Let graves become comfortable. Let birds speak and Hell close. Let our hands move as quickly as our minds and typewriters become weapons.

Photo by Annie Clingenpeel

Welcome to Graceland

Laura Reis Mayer

I never thought it would happen to me. My friends with children told me, some with actual tears in their eyes, that becoming a mother would change my life in ways I'd never imagined. I nodded and smiled, gave them that expected pregnant-but-serene smile of a woman who had waited her entire life for motherhood, yet secretly, I was afraid I was missing that gene that endows us with maternal instinct.

My pregnant friends spoke of "bonding" with their babies in utero, and questioned whether I could do the same when I refused to find out our baby's sex. I wondered how parents bonded in the old days, prior to ultrasounds and genetic engineering, but I said nothing and again wondered if I was doing something wrong, if I was supposed to be feeling something I wasn't. Don't get me wrong—I was fiercely protective of my baby while pregnant. Nothing made me madder than careless drivers or cigarette smokers. But as much as I was looking forward to meeting the baby that my husband and I had prayed for, I didn't feel "maternal," and I sure didn't feel "bonded."

And then Gracie entered my life. The most beautiful baby I had ever seen, she was a six-pound, fourteen-ounce bundle of personality, complete with a full head of dark, spiral curls. Later, my mother, who had been standing out in the hall during the last moments of delivery, said she heard me repeating over and over again the doctor's words: "It's a girl!" I don't remember that, but it goes to show how joyful waiting can be. So much for the accusations of the "don't you want to bond"ers.

Falling in love with Gracie has been a progressive process. Oh, no doubt, my husband and I were smitten on her birthday. But with each new milestone and each new smile, we feel another tug at those proverbial heartstrings. Not only do I find myself becoming the woman I swore I'd never become; I am also becoming the woman I never thought I *could* become—a real mommy. Instead of chatting with coworkers about the latest books, movies, or restaurants my husband and I have experienced, I share stories of bottle battles and compare numbers of teeth, words, and poops per day. I kiss her so often it's become an addiction and I can't wait to sniff her sweet curls each night after we bathe her in lavender bubbles. I regale her with nursery rhymes I had no idea I had tucked in the recesses of my memory. I complain about my loss of sleep, shape, and sex, but I drop whatever I'm doing to use my mommy magic and transform a crying baby back to my sweet Princess Grace.

I never thought it would happen to me, but oh, how it has. I am in love with a baby named Grace, and my friends were right—life will never be the same. I wouldn't want it any other way.

Painting by Bonnie Temple Cassara

8 a.m. on the Tarmac

Kenet Adamson

The dumpy scowl sits.
Tweed jacket gathered and bunched
by the seat belt.
It wants a single-malt scotch.
Double.
Straight up.

The uniform says no.

Lighting a pipe,
it fumes
and smokes.

Put it out.

We sit in a
traffic jam.
Six more planes ahead of us.
It scrunches down and
crushes the paperback's binding.

Two more hours in flight.
Viva Las Vegas.

Photo by Annie Clingenpeel

Show Time

Joanne S. Johnston

It's just August, but along the roadsides
sumacs, dogwoods, and sourwoods
give up the green for the red
Hinting at a production about to begin.

In a special place, petite maples
unable to wait to get on stage
scream with their orange attire
While close by, their elders sport mere splotches
of color around their edges.

In the distance, amid a sea of green
only a suggestion of red and yellow appear,
But you know it's coming!

Nature's annual production
painted with broad brushes
will herald a time of beauty
as the season
takes its final bow
to make way for Winter.

Photo by Joanne Johnston

Oh, Holy Night

Nelda Holder

I am sitting on the rough, scratchy wool rug in front of the fireplace, feeling its heat, enveloped by the noisy joy of a large and affectionate family. My cousins are around me on the floor; aunts and uncles are on sofas, chairs, piano benches, or milling about between the living room and kitchen, while Grandmother is still in the kitchen putting up dishes and food. We are all full of turkey, boiled custard, and fresh coconut cake.

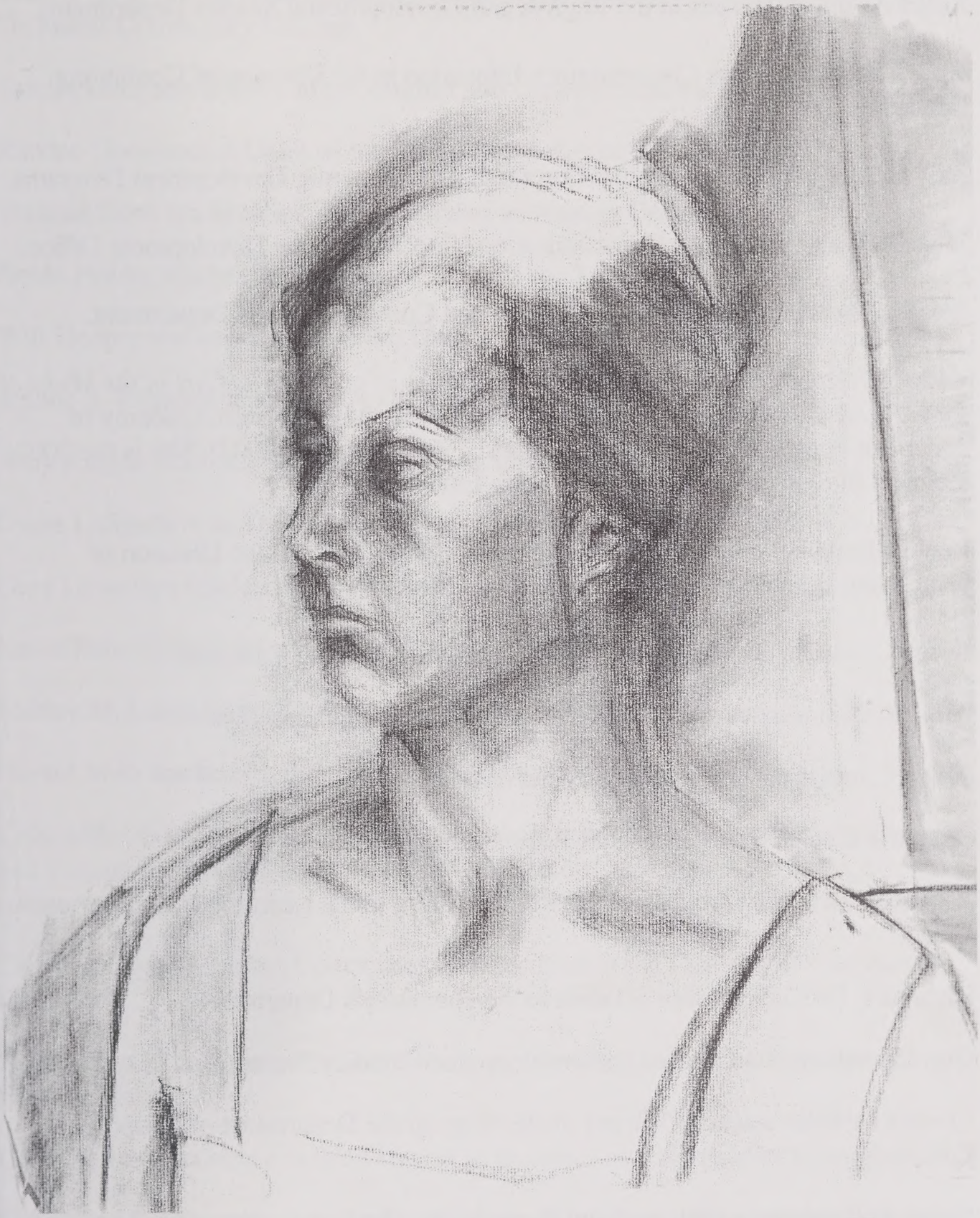
Granddaddy is on his throne, the green stuffed chair, smiling beneficently at his subjects. His contentment suffuses the room, enhancing the laughter and embellishing the glow of the tree. I feel nothing could make him happier than this gathering, this holiday, this family.

The gifts are piled haphazardly under the chosen-from-the-land pine, shaken and tossed back by a dozen pairs of cousin hands. We must wait until they are through in the kitchen. Then we must wait as the gifts are disbursed one by one, opened individually before our rapt attention—which vies for prominence with our childish impatience. Each box then goes around the full circle for closer scrutiny.

We children will toss wrappings wildly at our turn, then wad them up and throw them into the flames, moving back as the fire throws its heat farther into the room. Then we will "slip" out, light our candles, and sing at the north window. This is our gift to them, penniless as we are. We know they will love it, will "oooh" and "aaah" over the loveliness of our young voices.

I look at my grandfather's white head and kind face. I hear the voices, all talking at once and all distinguished/distinguishable. Uncle Frank's playful urgency. Aunt Clarice's rapid inquiry. My daddy's basso. My Aunt Hazel's titter. Steve is gossiping. Rebecca is complaining. Carol is talking quietly.

I am sitting in the middle of a pool of love, knowing I can turn in any direction with the same buoyancy.



Drawing by Joan Worth

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Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

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